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## Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art

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# Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art

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## Abstract

Humanity's life on Earth is taking a concerning direction: the years to come will be shaped by issues such as the devastating effects of climate change or the chaotic consequences of mass migration. In order to be able to alter in any form the course of events that are currently forming a devastating future for the planet and humankind, there is a need for an individual recognition that the things-of-the-world matter to us, personally. This understanding can emerge in us if we go beyond the hegemony of the ego that is driven by the current, production, gain and profit centered mindset. In the book, *Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art* I argue that the space in which we, as individuals, can revisit and alter how we are in the world, are spaces of 'ground zero', empty spaces that are beyond the structured Symbolic reality that we take for granted and live as our life. In the research it is demonstrated that certain contemporary art practices are able to invite the beholder into this state of 'ground zero' in a very particular way. Some contemporary art does this so effectively, that the beholder is drawn into themselves not only cognitively, but also emotionally and even physically. There is an engagement with one's entire being beyond the control of the ego. This book explores various aspects of this most important experience.

## Contents

Abstract .....	iv
Contents .....	v
List of illustrations .....	vii
Acknowledgements .....	x
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 - The need for art.....	17
1.1 Outline .....	17
1.2 Pressing matters.....	20
1.3 Alternative perspectives – from structure to matter.....	23
1.4 Ground zero.....	31
1.5 Art as an alternative space .....	49
Chapter 2 - Beyond representation.....	57
2.1 Outline .....	57
2.2 Representation .....	59
2.3 Overcoming representation .....	65
2.4 Agency .....	69
2.5 <i>Uncle R</i> – away from representation .....	75
2.6 <i>Muster</i> as representation and as agency .....	81
2.7 Towards absence.....	90
Chapter 3 - From presence to absence .....	92
3.1 Outline .....	92
3.2 The concept of presence .....	93
3.3 Presence and art.....	97
3.4 From presence to absence .....	102
3.5 Absence is the case .....	105
Chapter 4 - Rupture.....	122
4.1 Outline .....	122
4.2 The nature of rupture.....	123
4.3 Shock versus rupture.....	124
4.4 Condition for rupture – the contradictory image .....	128
4.6 Trauma and rupture .....	135
4.7 The impact of rupture .....	141
4.8 Rupture on the Symbolic.....	143
4.9 The potentials of rupture in contemporary art.....	147
Chapter 5 - Transitional space, transformational object .....	150
5.1 Outline .....	150
5.2 The transitional space of the child .....	151
5.3 The transformational space of the child .....	154
5.4 Transitional space in adult life .....	156
5.5 Image as transitional space .....	159
5.6 Transitional and transformational space in art – from <i>Madonna</i> to <i>Muster</i> .....	161
Epilogue .....	178
Bibliography.....	193
Summary .....	199

Samenvatting.....	203
Curriculum Vitae.....	207

## List of illustrations

Fig 1. Graph of CO<sub>2</sub> growth since the Industrial Revolution (Credit: Vostok ice core data/J.R. Petit et al.; NOAA Mauna Loa CO<sub>2</sub> record.) (Available at: <http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>).

Fig 2. Campement urbain, *I and us* (2005-). Photograph taken of female participant in the art project initiated by the artist collective. © Sylvie Blocher (Available at: <http://www.realtimearts.net/article/95/9776>).

Fig 3. Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506). Oil on panel, 107 x 77 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. (Illustration available at: <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/874.html>).

Fig 4. Lucian Freud, *Sunny morning with eight legs* (1997). Oil on canvas, 234 x 132.1 cm. Joseph Winterbotham Collection (Ref: 1997.561. Illustration available at: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/148306>).

Fig 5. Raphael, *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505). Alternative title: *Madonna del Prato*. Oil on board, 113 x 88 cm. [Kunsthistorisches Museum](#), Vienna. (Illustration available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna\\_del\\_Prato\\_\(Raphael\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna_del_Prato_(Raphael))).

Fig 6. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation* (1440-41). Fresco, 230 x 321 cm. San Marco convent, Florence. (Illustration available at: <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/255.html>).

Fig 7. Copper head called Obalufon from Ife (12-16<sup>th</sup> century). Life size, copper cast. British Museum. (Illustration available at: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1d/Yoruba-bronze-head.jpg>).

Fig 8. Alexander Tinei, *Uncle R* (2009). Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm. Private collection. (Illustration available at: <http://tinei.tumblr.com/post/89719222/uncle-r-2009-100-x-80-cm-oil-on-canvas>).

Fig 9. Installation view of *Muster*, documenta 13 (2012). Available at: [http://www.filmlinc.org/page/-/uploads/comment/film\\_comment\\_blog/Muster-\(Rushes\).png](http://www.filmlinc.org/page/-/uploads/comment/film_comment_blog/Muster-(Rushes).png).

Fig 10. Breitenau monastery church. Photograph taken by the author.

Fig 11. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1945. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Fig 12. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1945. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 13. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1945. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 14. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1945. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 15. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1945. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 16. Still from *Muster* (2012) part 1945. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 17. Still from *Muster* (2012) part 1970. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 18. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1970. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 19. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1970. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 20. Michael Alfano, *Holocaust Monument* (2001). Bronze, 120% life size.

Jericho Jewish Center, NY. (Illustration available at:

<http://www.michaelalfano.com/monuments.html>).

Fig 21. Holocaust monument, Pere Lachaise cemetery. (Illustration available at: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/b2/0b/b8/b20bb871ceaffc9b074fe4f46262abdc.jpg>).

Fig 22. Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Antonietta Gonzalez* (1595). Oil on canvas, 57 x 46 cm.

Musée du Château de Blois, Blois. (Illustration available at:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lavinia\\_Fontana -  
Portrait of Antonietta Gonzalez - WGA07981.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lavinia_Fontana_-_Portrait_of_Antonietta_Gonzalez_-_WGA07981.jpg)).

Fig 23. Jusepe Ribera, *Magdalena Ventura with her husband and son* (1631). Oil on canvas, 196 x 127 cm. Prado, Madrid. (Illustration available at:

[http://uploads7.wikiart.org/images/jusepe-de-ribera/magdalena-ventura-with-her-husband-  
and-son-1631.jpg](http://uploads7.wikiart.org/images/jusepe-de-ribera/magdalena-ventura-with-her-husband-and-son-1631.jpg)).

Fig 24. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* (2011). Wax pigments wicks, steel, installation dimensions variable. (Illustration available at: <http://www.designboom.com/art/urs-fischer-at-venice-art-biennale-2011/>).

Fig 25. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* (2011), detail. Wax pigments wicks, steel, installation dimensions variable. (Illustration available at: <http://www.designboom.com/art/urs-fischer-at-venice-art-biennale-2011/>).

Fig 26. Hsieh Chun-te, *Raw, Priest* (1987-2010). Archival inkjet print, 54.5×70.31cm.m (Available at: <http://collection.kmfa.gov.tw/kmfa/artsdisplay.asp?systemno=0000005221&viewsource=list> ).

Fig 27. Hsieh Chun-te, *Raw -The tears of Danshuei river* (1987-2010) Archival inkjet print, 54.5×70.38cm. (Available at: <http://collection.kmfa.gov.tw/kmfa/artsdisplay.asp?systemno=0000005227>)

Fig 28. Transitional object brutalized or destroyed. (Available at: [http://s83.photobucket.com/user/intercooled\\_steve/media/headless20teddy20bear.jpg.html](http://s83.photobucket.com/user/intercooled_steve/media/headless20teddy20bear.jpg.html)).

Fig 29. Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506) – for parameters see Fig 3.

Fig 30. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), still, part 1994. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 31. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1994. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 32. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1994. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 33. Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Muster* (2012), screenshot, part 1994. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 34. Entrance to *This variation* (2012) from the courtyard of the Huguenot house, Kassel, Germany. Photograph taken by the author.

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In 2012, documenta 13 took place in Kassel, Germany, and I had the opportunity to visit this most important event. While spending time at the exhibitions, I gained a completely new insight about the potentials that lie within art. It was there, that I had come to realize that art is indeed a space that is crucial for us to engage with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Regarding acknowledgements, I am most indebted to this event and exhibiting artists. This particular state of consciousness that, as I had come to understand, art might open up, was first realized there and consequentially became the object of this research.

The academic articulation of this state was facilitated by two wonderful supervisors: Prof. dr. Rob Zwijnenberg and Prof. dr. Kitty Zijlmans. Their thorough work with this often difficult, highly personal subject gradually lead me to be able to put into words what is not necessarily for the verbal realm, and theorize a personal intuition. I am most grateful for their support, academic rigor, and incredibly open approach.

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Finally, putting down into words what this state of consciousness, the ground zero in art might represent was enabled by Zen practice that I have been deeply engaging with in the past few of years. Zen helped me reveal just how much there is to see, once the chance is given to step beyond the ego.

## Introduction

“The sky is falling, the globe is warming, the ozone hole persists; people are dying of radiation poisoning and other toxic agents; species are being wiped out, thousands per year... Huge globalized corporations are making bids for the necessities of life from water to health care... What a perfect opportunity to sit back and reflect on ideas of space, subjectivity, environment, and poetics” (Morton 2007:10). This argument is presented by philosopher, Timothy Morton, for addressing how absurd it might seem like to take the time to reflect upon cultural, psychological, environmental and artistic issues in times that seemingly call for urgent solutions for the problems currently threatening our world. Yet, Morton adds that for reflecting upon issues such as “space, subjectivity... poetics” along with art “there could be no better time” (Morton 2007:10).

The starting point of this research is this Morton-ian assumption that although it might sound like a bizarre idea, we need art and reflections on the nature and capacity of art *especially* in these pressing times. Why? How can art in any way help to find possible solutions for current state of things today? What is the relevance of artistic practices for a world that deals with countless matters of emergency in the struggle for its own survival? Arguing that we need art especially in times like this suggests that art has something significant to offer us in such a turbulent era.

The starting hypothesis of this research is that, indeed, art can somehow offer possible ways to deal with the pressing matters of the world today. It is suggested that there is much more to art than simply an engagement with beauty that is reserved as a luxurious activity for times of peace. There is also more to art than social criticism or awareness raising; a role that might be associated with contemporary art in general. These, indeed - one can argue understandably - we might not need at this point as engaging with beauty might really appear to be a luxurious activity at this stage. Furthermore, when it comes to awareness-raising, most communities are becoming fully aware that we are in trouble and there is a need to act and we do not necessarily need art to call our attention to it. What is it

then that art can offer? Can it offer anything other than beauty or conventional awareness-raising?

We are living in times in which we urgently need to start *doing differently*. It is obvious that the old models do not work any more. The question is *how* to act? How to implement change so it saves (or at least expands) the future days of humankind and does not lead to civil war? One solution might be that all of us on the planet start to live a completely different lifestyle. However, one certainly cannot order people to live radically differently and enforce policies onto countries that order the end to a way of life we have been leading for the past few hundred years. This would lead to disorder, given that most people are not ready for radical change. Yet, the troubles that we are now facing are certainly the consequence of our actions and behavior. This implies that, in order for any practical change to take place, there is a need for thorough, in-depth transformation and personal, as well as collective, realization that things have to be done differently. So possible solutions should be sought for in understanding, revealing and changing the *attitude* on an individual level, that very attitude that sustains civilization in a form that most possibly will lead us to hardships we cannot even imagine yet.

In order to implement any change, it is the attitude towards life itself that calls for a re-evaluation. What is this attitude that should be reconsidered? The frame of mind with which our profit-centered rationalism-based civilization has been conducting its life is an ego-centric approach in which we want the best for ourselves in as short of a time as possible. It appears that this mindset is the foundation of our behavior towards the world. This approach to life can be seen as the foundation for the course of life in modernist and industry-based Western societies focused on a goal and production oriented mindset and a problem-solution framework. This comes intertwined with the capitalist self-centered behavior with which we have been conducting our lives in order to obtain larger gain and benefit for ourselves with every act we do. Although one could argue that this is natural human behavior, this kind of thinking has gotten us into the worrying ecological and political situation we are now facing. Is there no other way to think about life and about the things-of-the-world, but purely from a self-centered, anthropocentric viewpoint? Can our approach towards life in general change?

If we overcome this mentality, what can we adopt instead? Should we all start going green, stop using cars and give as many rights to animals as to people? There are many

discourses around ranging from Greenpeace to the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement.<sup>1</sup> Many world-views represented by organizations seem to offer 'a' solution. But what if they are wrong? It seems as if there is no time left to start experimenting with possible meta-narratives for creating yet another world-view to find solutions. History proves that meta-narratives are overthrown in the short or long run anyway. If no meta-narrative is adopted, what to do then, which direction to follow?

I suggest that the problems we are now facing result from the ego-centered mentality of our species and it should be caught at its core, namely at the attitude with which we individually and collectively conduct our lives. If there is a way out, it should be through a different frame of mind in which the personal, immediate interest of the ego does not dictate decision-making.

I think it is clear that a new attitude can only be adopted if change takes place on an *individual* level. The approach towards life in general can only change if there is deep, *personal* understanding about life that *emerges* in human beings and is not imposed: change that comes from deep inside. In this arena of challenges, from political crisis to global warming, collective change can only take place if change first happens on an individual, personal level, if every single one of us deeply understands that we simply cannot continue living as we are doing right now. A deep acknowledgement of this fact cannot come from a higher decision imposed or enforced upon us by political parties. It is not even enough to make such decisions rationally and change certain practices just because there is a must. The understanding that the ego-centric attitude – “the best, now, for myself, at all costs” – has to change inside individuals. The matters of the world need to touch us personally.

I am aware that all this might sound like an idealistic spiritual endeavor, but it is not as 'simplistic' as that. It might be idealistic, but I think that if we are honest with ourselves we realize that there is no other option for survival. Furthermore, as I am going to argue, the possibility of such change is closer than one would think. Indeed, letting go of immediate self-interest might actually be easier than we imagine. As individuals and as society we might be able to find spaces in which our goal-gain-benefit oriented attitude is – at least for some time – suspended. We might be able to step into states of consciousness in which the 'things-of-the-world' in their complexity can 'arrive to' us, and the constantly pestering ego that always wants more, wants it now and for itself, can retire at least for a short time. In

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm1QojjwGdo>.

these spaces, in the *experience* of thinking and existing outside the confines of our socially constructed ego-boundaries one might have the chance to sense how to be in the world in ways 'other than' coded into us by ego-centric behavior. These states of mind, that will be elaborated in Chapter One, might be the key for adopting a different attitude in decision-making, and can be experienced as a state of 'zero ground', in which the ego boundaries are broken through. In these spaces, the general framework in which we operate can be arrested and alternative ways of being in the world might surface.

How does art fit into all this? Can contemporary art, the subject of this research, take us beyond the hegemonic, production-gain oriented mindset we are conditioned to live with and if so, how is it done? Can art be one of these states of 'ground zero' (see Ch.1) and if so, what does it look like? As will be demonstrated throughout the book, some contemporary artworks can enable a personal deconstruction of those imposed structures according to which we have been conducting our lives and have taken for granted. Contemporary art can be unique in this regard, as it is neither instructive, nor prescriptive. It just simply sheds light on the value-systems which have led us into this extremely dangerous situation. In other words, I argue that some contemporary art can offer a most valuable experience in this 'mission', as it can enable us, individually, to see beyond the constraining ego-boundaries that would otherwise never occur to us to reconsider. Once beyond the ego, new alternatives might emerge.

### **Away from interpretation**

When thinking of art and its ability to contribute towards the pressing matters of the world, one might argue that any artwork, ranging from a pretty looking picture to a disturbing sculpture is not much more than the expression of a particular set of meanings. The observer, in the process of 'getting' the meaning, looks at an artwork, grasps the message, engages with it somehow and under a stronger or milder influence walks out of the gallery/museum and goes on living his or her life. In other words, the everyday observer is trained to engage with any artwork under the assumption that the piece is there to represent something. This way of looking is so powerfully embedded in us, observers, that we no longer realize that it is a learnt and not a 'natural', instinctive way of looking at art. Art, for us in general, is there to illustrate and mirror phenomena particular to those socio-

cultural times, creating a specific visual body of knowledge that can be decoded and mastered through looking.

Along with that, many art historical schools treat the artwork as evidence of 'other than artistic' phenomena. Certainly, in such discourse, the artwork is looked upon with respect and with an acknowledgement that it can show, illustrate, demonstrate or even inspire us to engage with the things of the world through a specific, namely artistic perspective. It appears that such an approach treats the artwork as a messenger, a carrier of a larger than itself issue, taking for granted that the 'meaning' behind an artwork can be found and decoded. What is the problem with this approach towards art? Of course, it is always interesting to engage with cultural evidence (such as and through art) and one can also learn a huge amount from it, but its influence and possible relevance for the matters of the world today is questionable. One can argue that if art is looked upon as a representation, than the engagement with art is really no more than a luxurious pastime in times of peace, security and plentitude, and certainly has no relevance for our times of urgency. From this perspective, the inspiration from the famous last line from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Archaic torso of Apollo*: "Du must dein Leben ändern. / You must change your life" remains empty words for us today, as the artwork itself as cultural evidence does not carry any significant force that might impact our life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet, maybe the reason why art cannot exercise its other than representationalist power on us should not be blamed on art, but on the discourse that enframes art as a carrier of particular, decodable statements of knowledge. In other words, the reason why art is considered a luxury item without a real force that can impact our lives now, today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, might not lie in art itself, but in how the institutional framework, including art history, treats art. No matter how powerful the jinn might be, if we keep it locked in the lamp it is not going to fulfill any wishes.

Therefore, I argue that there might be more to art than an expression of a set of meanings within a taken-for-granted social framework. The context of this research is about understanding art beyond the representational aesthetical model. This 'other than interpretive' shift in the approach towards art is introduced in the following paragraphs. I briefly look into how the most commonly used interpretive art history and art theory has been (and still is) treating art in a way that it is reduced to cultural evidence of past (and present) times, and I refer to a few art historians who realize the need for a different



approach that might allow the force of art to manifest. This is done with the idea in mind that in order for art to evoke any change, it has to be let out of the box of representational cultural data.

In his book *Confronting images. The end of a certain history of art* (2005) French philosopher and art historian, Georges Didi-Huberman, puts the blame on art history for limiting the impact of art and therefore its influence on the beholder. He analyses significant stations of the art history canon from Vasari through Kant to Panofsky, and argues that it is in the tradition of reason that today's observer is educated to engage with art. Reason categorizes, boxes, structures and approaches the things of the world with a logical, linear understanding. This attitude fixes and freezes, in other words, objectifies, as something can only become an object of study if its motions and changes are stopped. As Didi-Huberman argues: "Not only does the history of art desire its object to be *past*, the object of a 'simple past,' so to speak, at the limit, it desires its object to be fixed, extinguished, worn out, withered, finished, and finally discolored: in short, an object that has *passed away*. A strange desire, then, and desolate, this work of mourning carried out by reason in the face of its object, having secretly and in advance assassinated it" (2005:44).

In other words, stereotypically speaking, for interpretive art history to examine a work of art, the art already has to be dead, ready to be dissected on the operating table. Didi-Huberman argues that this attitude has been the case in art history for the past hundred years. This approach towards art was brought into full manifestation by one of the greatest scholars of art history whose model – as anticipated previously – has been followed by the everyday observer (often unconsciously). It was art historian Erwin Panofsky who really was aiming to create an empirical science of art writing, and his method has gained international recognition. Panofsky was following the modernist model set out by the most noted philosopher of reason, Immanuel Kant. Didi-Huberman writes:

When art historians were conscious that their work pertained exclusively to the faculty of knowledge, and not to the faculty of judgment, when they decided to produce a discourse of objective universality (*objective Allgemeinheit*, in Kant's words) and no longer a discourse of subjective norms, then the Kantism of pure reason became a necessary way station for all those who sought to reground

their discipline, and to redefine 'art' as an 'object' of knowledge rather than as a subject of academic squabbles (2005:93).

As Didi-Huberman notes, this objectification of art that treats the artwork as a dead body to be grasped by pure reason, serves as basis for interpretive art history. This attitude towards art is not universal, but has nevertheless been widely adopted. Briefly put, the foundations and the model are as follows: the work of art is a visual language that can be decoded according to the linguistic Saussure-ian model. Saussure saw words as signifiers for the signified, and to Panofsky also, the artwork is a signifier of a particular (set of) meaning through which the message can be deduced. The model follows a careful structure. First, when confronting a work of art there is the 'practical experience' which is basically an identification of what is seen. This is followed by iconography, a 'reading' of the image and pairing what is seen with other-than-artistic information, usually cultural data. Finally, iconology follows and it identifies the cultural phenomena emergent in the work of art, therefore enabling an understanding of the artwork as a socio-cultural messenger (Panofsky 1972).

Description, iconography, iconology. This triad has become so natural that it is even difficult to imagine how to think of art in any other way. This model results in the creation of a certain knowledge derived from the art object that is treated as cultural evidence of a particular epoch. Through such a method, no uncertainty is left about the place and meaning of the artwork; there is a scientific mapping of the object. Just what relevance that object has for us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is another question. Many art historians have realized that although this approach might be valuable, it might not do justice to the work of art. Didi-Huberman's critical take on this method is read clearly (2005:3):

Books on the history of art nonetheless know how to give us the impression of an object truly grasped and reconnoitered in its every aspect, like a past elucidated without remainder. Everything here seems visible, discerned. Exit the uncertainty principle. The whole of the visible here seems read, deciphered in accordance with the self assured— apodictic—semiology of a medical diagnosis. And all of this makes, it is said, a *science*, a science based in the last resort on the certainty that the representation functions unitarily, that it is an accurate mirror or a transparent window, and that on the immediate ("natural") or indeed the

transcendental ("symbolic") level, it is able to translate all concepts into images, all images into concepts.

Didi-Huberman sees the real danger of this approach in the verbalization and conceptualization of the artwork, and it is this direct translation of images into concepts that he clearly opposes on various grounds. Firstly, it is a given that we are looking at a visual phenomenon (an image). The visual is beyond the verbal, cognitive realm of concepts, so putting visual into conceptual is already a limitation of the image. Secondly, equating images with other cultural evidence of the past always takes place through the perspective of the analyst.<sup>2</sup> In other words, if Panofsky wants to see order and clarity in the image, then he will look for meaning in related texts that are structured and ordered, ignoring aspects of that era that fall *outside* the framework that he is aiming to construct to understand the image.<sup>3</sup>

The next question that calls for an answer is that if such a thing as an 'objective apperception' of the work of art is not possible, and should not even be the goal of art history, how should one look at art? In other words, how to write an art history that can come closer to 'being true' to art? How can one *write* the *visual*? Before the actual act of writing, a different type of looking should be exercised. The type of looking Didi-Huberman suggests the beholder should adopt is: "Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions, where interpretation would have time to deploy itself in several dimensions... . There would also be ... a dialectical moment ... consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of *letting go of one's knowledge about it*" (2005:26).

This statement is of key importance for this research and also crucial from the viewpoint of the 'different attitude' we should adopt for the matters of the world. What is it

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<sup>2</sup> This he demonstrates through an analysis of the Fra Angelico *Annunciation* scene for the full exploration of the image see *Confronting images* (2005:11-52).

<sup>3</sup> This is also the critical insight of art history, the art historian, Michael-Ann Holly, presents in her book *Past looking. Historical imagination and the rhetoric of the image* (1996). Holly draws a critical analysis on the work of Jacob Burckhardt entitled *The civilization of the Renaissance* first published in 1860. She points out that the book represents a melancholic nostalgia of lost times of some golden age from the viewpoint of someone who could never fit into his present life. She argues that Burckhardt is "always the melancholic observer on the other side of history, the outsider looking in, the spectator who admires but can never inhabit the sunny vistas from which he is separated in time" (1996:41). What Holly is referring to ties into the argument of Didi-Huberman, namely that it is not enough that the artwork is treated as a dead object, meaning is also projected onto it by the world-view of the interpreter. This methodology does not only take force out of the work of art as entity – meaning it claims it to be dead -, it also distances the artwork from the observer even further as one is taught to understand the artwork from the perspective of the interpreter.

exactly? Didi-Huberman says it is the resistance of giving the image an *a priori* conceptual framework. In other words, it *should not be us*, observers or theorists, *who dictate* on behalf of the image, but we should suspend interpretation and jumping to conclusions. Claims such as what this or that image might mean should come to a halt. Instead, the observer should *let the image work*, initiate communication.

“Our question here is one of method” (2005:26), claims Didi-Huberman. Or as I would put it: our question here is one of *attitude*. Once the beholder lets the artwork come to them rather than them ‘invading’ the image, a very different experience of the artwork arises. Didi-Huberman, while spending time looking at the Fra Angelico work and concentrating on the white surface of the image, suggests: “Already, these few moments of posing our gaze to the whiteness of an image have taken us rather far from the kind of determinism to which the history of art has accustomed us” (2005:26).

What Didi-Huberman suggests, and I agree, is that once the beholder lets art work, it might happen in ways that fall beyond a direct expression of a specific set of meanings, therefore fall beyond knowledge and the usual paved path of a structured understanding of the image. As he puts it: “Such are the stakes: to know, but also to think not-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge. To proceed dialectically. Beyond knowledge itself, to commit ourselves to the paradoxical ordeal not to *know...*, but to *think* the element of not-knowledge that dazzles us whenever we pose our gaze to an art image. Not to think a perimeter, a closure—as in Kant—but to experience a constitutive and central rift: there where self-evidence, breaking apart, empties and goes dark” (2005:7).

This ‘breaking apart of self-evidence’ in grasping the image results in a very different experience of art for us observers. Such engagement with art necessarily calls for a different way of writing art history. Maybe this other type of looking cannot be translated into theoretical language. Or maybe the ‘art speak’ is going to sound very different from a scientific, analytical report. Maybe it is going to become a language that is personal and maybe there will be gaps along with random thoughts, and sentences without an end. However, this is the terrain of the visual that does not simply collide with a rational structure that can be mapped and from which meaning can be extracted, one that represents, instructs and orders.

## Art speak

The art historians who necessitate an other-than-interpretive treatment of images do not follow an essentialist tradition; they do not think of the artwork having an ontological status, as some kind of timeless entity that could be touched by the beholder, whilst not reducing it to just meaning. Instead of essentialization on the one hand and interpretation on the other, they suggest that the art historian should 'translate' the work of art. However, what is meant by 'translation' is not that the visual should be put into verbal concepts in the way words from one language are put into another. 'Translation' is an act in flux that keeps up with the lively throbbing of the artwork.<sup>4</sup>

This 'art speak', as one of the prominent thinkers in the field of cultural analysis, Mieke Bal (2002), explains, emerges through translation that is understood in a specific way. Although her point is derived from a post-structuralist approach that I aim to take further, to put it simply she claims meaning is always in flux, always depending on the current state of the observer. I fully embrace her concept of 'translation' as a basic attitude in my research, therefore in the following I will first explain this term more in depth.

In order to do justice to art, as Bal explains, one should not aim to reconstruct, but translate images: "history, including the history of art, is neither a reconstruction of nor an identification with the past; it is a form of translation" (2002:64). By the term 'translation' she – along with philosopher Walter Benjamin - understands "to conduct through, pass beyond, to the other side of a division or difference" (2002:64). This implies that Bal sees translation not as a direct pairing of a specific phenomenon with a given concept, but rather as a grasping of the visual phenomenon and its indirect articulation in floating language. This language of art is in motion, in flux with several un-endings, always with "misreadings" and never a language to the point. The translation of art to her is "best understood as doing – of forming..." (2002:92). In other words, translation would be an act of constant becoming. As opposed to mirroring, decoding and putting the image into meaning through words, the language of art that is translation is an indirect language of – as Bal argues - "approximation". This language should be used in contrast with the linear language often

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<sup>4</sup> Translation studies has developed to become an independent field of study cooperating with cultural studies of various kinds. One of the most significant figures of the field is professor of comparative literature, Susan Bassnett.

adopted by art historians which encloses the artwork itself into a singular, direct and teleological mapping of the art and the experience.<sup>5</sup>

What does this 'other than representational' art history look like? In order to explain the nature of art history as translation, another analogy is presented. This language of 'translational art history', according to Bal, is that of the critic in Benjamin's understanding of the role. He distinguishes between critic and commentator: although the latter freezes art in language and looks for meaning to be decoded and explained in the visual experience; the former, the critic looks at the artwork as 'alive'. Bal quotes Benjamin in order to demonstrate the difference between the two: "while the former (the commentator) is left with wood and ashes as the sole object of his analysis, the latter (the critic) is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive. This the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by" (2002:83).

Hence, as suggested in the previous quotation, she encourages a 'type of looking' and therefore an art history that treats the artwork as alive. One that leaves space for a dialogue with the artwork, that does not aim to freeze it in various discourses or look at the work merely as evidence and carrier of a particular set of meanings, in other words, an art history that *lets art take its course*.

If art is not looked upon merely as evidence or data, how should it be comprehended? Given that this kind of art history attributes 'life' to art, I argue that it does the most justice to art if it treats art as an *agent*. If the artwork is looked upon as a living entity, then consequentially one can argue that it is active and has agency. Although scholars such as Bal and American art historian Michael-Ann Holly already touch upon this nature of the work of art, it is the anthropologist, Alfred Gell (1998), who clarifies this approach towards the artwork and is one of the main pillars of this research.

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<sup>5</sup> This latter is an "atomized" attitude that Benjamin also disagreed with. Therefore, similarly to how art changed, art history should also reconsider itself. It can be argued that just like Celan managed to write poetry after Auschwitz, art history should also catch up with art. Adorno was right in the sense that poetry cannot be written after Auschwitz still, poetry is being written, but not the kind of poetry that would suit the modernist, representational attitude. Just like Celan re-invented poetry to talk about the unspeakable, art history should be re-invented to talk about the visual; the visual that is not verbal, therefore in essence is not to be talked about, but to be seen.

This change in attitude is of crucial importance for this book. The artwork, as a living agent that exercises its force on us, observers, in a dialectical relationship is the basic attitude of this text. It is most important to grant agency to artworks because only if we, beholders, let art work on us, it can exercise its force that might point toward other than representational elements. Once this force is liberated from the constraints of a conceptual state of affairs defined by social order and hegemony, art is given a chance to exercise its force on us, the kind of force that is not anticipated by the interpreter. Only in this case can one start discussing art as 'force for being in the world' in terms 'other than'. "You must change your life"; a change that involves a complete shift in perception might occur only if we grant a non-teleologically defined force to art.

### **This art history**

Having covered these arguments, there is a need to go back to the initial question, namely just what relevance art as an agent might have for us in effectively addressing the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It was suggested that practices that draw one into a 'ground zero' are needed in order to go beyond the hegemonic structure we are defined by.

The core hypothesis of this research is the following: if art is able to draw the beholder into various states of not-knowing, into a variety of un-endings beyond the grip of the cognitive ego, once beyond this hegemonic self-evident structure, then some contemporary art practices are able to draw the beholder into a state of 'ground zero', and therefore provide a platform for yet unknown ways to grasp the world. It is this ability of contemporary art that is the interest of this research and through which an in-depth exploration of specific artworks starts.

Just what kind of art history writing should the reader expect to see in this book? Although the 'art speaks' of the above mentioned theorists such as Bal and Holly are most respected and followed, I defer from them in terms of shifting the weight of my focus from the relationship of art and observer to the artwork itself. In other words, I attribute more ontological status to art than Holly or Bal within the context of the specific encounter with art. This means that I try to give as much space as possible for art to work on *me*, the individual, personal beholder. I focus on the artwork as an object of 'concentrated attention' in order to see what it can potentially do to me, personally, and how the things that are

done to *me* by the artwork happen. Although at first sight it might seem as if I am going to write a personal account of engaging with art, I am actually going to give an art theory that puts the potential of the personal experience of art engagement into theoretical focus. I feel that I need to stress that attention is given to the individual, as I argue that social change and a shift in collective attitude towards the things-of-the-world can only take place if there is change at a personal, individual level. The idea of the impartial observer who is objectively looking at the artwork as a frozen object has been overthrown. Art, then, has to be talked about as an experience, and the discussion should start (and also end) with one's own, personal encounter.

### **The steps**

The focus point of this research is the exploration of a space that is (created by) the art experience that – as suggested – can serve as some kind of a 'ground zero' for letting the things-of-the-world come to us in other-than presupposed constellations. If contemporary art can do this, the potentials of the space it might draw us, beholders, into are immense. This suggested 'potential space' of contemporary art in the research is called the 'transitional space of contemporary art'. Other than working as 'ground zero', it has various other characteristics. The aspects of this space are explored from Chapter Two to Chapter Five in order to see just what potentials it might have for the beholder, namely for the individual, and consequentially, for society.

First of all, it is suggested that art is a 'creature' with active agency exercised on the viewer. Various agents have different kind of agencies, though. The question is a given: within what might lie the agency of contemporary art? For instance, is it the same agency as that of Renaissance pieces? It is suggested that whereas the agency of many (pre)modern artworks can be seen as an intention to take us to 'a specific' place, some contemporary artworks are taking us to many places, yet to nowhere. Or to be precise, they are taking us to a space of absence, into a space that is not characterized by 'a particular' experience, but rather by a cloud of associations that surface in a disorderly manner, calling us to revisit not necessarily the subject-matter of the artwork, but ourselves. It is argued in Chapter Two that in the case of contemporary art, the agency of some artworks is really unique because, as



opposed to being a particular phenomenon that exists outside of the beholder, it invites the beholder towards themselves and that is the central element of their agency.

How can contemporary art possibly open us up to a space in ourselves? Would we, observers, have the chance to turn into ourselves if we were overpowered by an experience? Hardly so. As suggested in Chapter Three, it might be the case that contemporary art – although it can be an extremely powerful experience – neither comes with a statement, nor exercises active presence on the observer. Instead, it opens up space for us to confront and experiment with various associations and approaches towards the matters of the world, without the imposing of any directions.

The subsequent question is what exactly is this ‘force’, that is able to open up this space of absence for non-teleological associations? Some contemporary artworks might be seen as an active ‘cut’ into the body of the social order, and by going beyond the power-structure we are socially bound by, they might open up space for alternative ways for us to be in the world. It must be noted that although many contemporary artworks have the ability to create ‘a tear’, not all types of rift are radical enough to completely slash through our conceptual state of affairs, to the point of ‘ground zero’, in which nothing remains. Although many artworks can interrogate certain psychological or social frameworks, they stay within the (hegemonic) structure they aim to overcome. I suggest, in Chapter Four, that some artworks have the ability to really take the beholder outside/beyond their inborn value-system and make them ‘fall apart’: I call this force ‘rupture’. Having shattered the ego-boundaries there is the chance for a revaluation.

The experience of contemporary artworks that takes us beyond representation, that demands personal engagement through rupture can be seen as a transitional, maybe even transformative. Chapter Five explores this transformational element of the experience. I use the term ‘transformational object’ for these artworks in order to pinpoint the transformative nature of the space some contemporary art practices draw us into. Contemporary art as a transformational object is of a specific nature. On the one hand, there might be transformation which tells us how and in which direction we should change. On the other hand, a transformative experience can simply just shed light on the current state of things, and leave us to decide where and how to continue. I argue that some contemporary art experiences can be seen as the latter. If the artwork is understood as some transformative event, it is here that its transformative force lies, namely in its ability to take

the beholder beyond the representation of their personal world, into a place of urges, needs, desires, attachments or repulsions that can and cannot be represented. By spending time confronting our own complexity, in a (relatively safe) place called art, there may be a chance to understand our world *otherwise*.

Overall, the chapters are therefore a guide through the various characteristics of the transitional space of contemporary art. Just what kind of art is going to be discussed? As already anticipated, in the research I am looking at certain contemporary artworks that are able to take the beholder beyond ego-boundaries, possibly asking for re-evaluation of the taken-for-granted hegemonic structures one is born into and continues living in, without even being aware of it. I am conscious of the fact that not all contemporary art is able to or intends to do this, and contrasting examples are presented throughout the book. The sort of contemporary artistic practices explored and are worthy of attention from the viewpoint of the urgency of the research are of a specific kind. They are not distinctive in terms of a particular style or medium; in the research I actually focus on three artworks of varying media, one is a painting, the other a film, the third is a performative piece. What is unique about these works is the character of their force. The artistic practices discussed, as well as others of similar nature, once they can exercise their force on us, are able to pierce through the observer's conceptual state of affairs and demand *complete* revaluation of the 'things-of-the-world'. They are not merely, for instance, a critique on art itself, they do not simply ignite a politically critical attitude, they do not only concern themselves with environmental problems or they do not merely address biographical, psychological issues or trauma. Actually, they might do all that on the level of surface narrative, but that is not where their force lies. Instead, they all go beyond actual, articulated issues and problems on a phenomenological level, and touch the beholder at their 'core', asking for a change in perception on the totality of how one is settled in the world. This they do beyond the cognitive and representational realm. Critical thinking is not enough to take one beyond one's conceptual state of affairs, one needs to experience things personally. Therefore, although this book is a theoretical journey, it takes *personal experience* as the departing and finishing points. In a sense, although experience might stand in contradiction to theory, in this research it is not only experience that gives rise to theory, but the experience *becomes* the theory, as all chapters invite the reader beyond the usual realm of theory, namely beyond the mind. Throughout the research, and when reading the Epilogue it hopefully

becomes obvious that I treat art as a tacit body of knowledge in which the focus is not on finding meaning, decoding, contextualizing, but on the possibility and potentials of the *personal experience*. It is us, individuals, who have to reach down into ourselves and experience ourselves beyond the imposed hegemonic structures in order to start existing and acting in the world *otherwise*.

In order for this new attitude towards the things-of-the-world to emerge, and therefore for a change in behavior to take place, the first step is to fall apart, to shatter, to touch the very bottom, to reach 'ground zero'. Apart from addressing the pressing issues of the world we are facing, this is the focus point of Chapter One.

## **Chapter 1 - The need for art**

Why do we need art? Why do we need art in a world that lives through such radically changing times that many suspect we are heading towards our own extinction, and that the destruction of the planet is inevitable? Can art be more than simply a luxury item and a toy for the wealthy intellectual? Can art do anything for society today, and if so, what potentials are there?

This research is based on the hypothesis that through the experience of contemporary art humankind can learn new, yet unknown alternatives to sustain itself and its surroundings. I argue that certain contemporary art practices have specific strategies that lie within the particular nature of their force. This force might reveal a different attitude or behavior from the ones that currently dictate our lives, and that most probably lead to devastation. It is hypothesized that by engaging with certain contemporary artworks, one can become familiar with a different mentality that could result in decisions that might be able to reverse, or at least soften the consequences of, the disturbing disasters predicted.

### **1.1 Outline**

This chapter starts by addressing the current issues we face on the planet, to highlight that we really are running out of time by not doing anything to prevent the natural disasters that will have such far reaching consequences. This is not a thesis on ecology, but ecological concerns are introduced in order to emphasize that it is the world's current thinking and attitude - a money-driven, capitalist, consumerist, anthropocentric view - that has driven us to the verge of disaster. As ecological concerns demonstrate, humankind can no longer ignore the consequences of its actions, both individually and on a social scale.

What does this dilemma have to do with art and in what way can art address any of these matters? I argue that there is one way to turn the course of events around, if it is not too late already, and that is through mastering a different mindset and attitude towards the

world and the planet. This, I argue, can take place through art. This does not mean that art itself can provide 'a solution', and that is not what I am proposing. I suggest, however, that certain contemporary artistic practices can help us exercise a different apperception of the state of things and therefore generate a change in our attitude towards the planet.

The need for a shift in attitude towards today's concerns is obvious, and has been recognized by many different forums. Within academia, for instance, various disciplines have started to explore alternative ways of thinking and the need for action. It appears to me that (slow)science, eco criticism and New Materialism, the three areas touched upon in this chapter, all agree on a new approach that manifests itself in interdisciplinarity, cooperation and unconventional, non-prescriptive approaches to life.

Interestingly, although they vary in method, a common point can be found in what they advocate: they call for the establishment of a space to exist without predefined structure, without goals previously defined by forums other than the community. Instead of arguing for yet another meta-narrative that could save the world, they take a different position and celebrate plurality, mini-narratives, inclusion, controversies, clashing ideas and non-teleological attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, what I find as a commonality for most of these disciplines, possibly along with many alternative practices, is the establishment of spaces in which they seek an alternative for hegemony. Consequentially, they are not calling for the making of platforms that are predefined by structure, goal, production and monetary gain. The articulation of such non-defined, non-prescriptive space is presented in a radical form by philosopher Catherine Malabou (2013) as 'zero point'. The potentials of this phenomenon are elaborated and taken further, introducing 'ground zero' as the key concept of this research.

How does art, and in this case contemporary art, fit into this new attitude? As the basis of the research, it is proposed that some contemporary artistic practices are able to generate this site of 'ground zero' in which I see immense potential for changing how one relates to oneself, life and society. Discussing how science should change, how our approach and social, collective behavior towards the planet should be altered, is important, but I think that significant alteration of events can only take place if there is change within the

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<sup>1</sup> Mini-narratives is a terminology I borrow from Jean-Francois Lyotard. In *The postmodern condition. A report on knowledge* (1979) he contrasts meta/grand- and mini-narratives, the former standing for general truth claims that humankind treat as unquestionable truisms, the latter for the 'truth of the local or the singular'. By 'teleological' I mean predefined, goal oriented, prescriptive.

individual. When it comes to the force of art, mentioned above, I note that it is usually not the concept of 'ground zero' that scholars come up with in order to address urgent change. Therefore, before I explore how contemporary art can open up such a space and why it is most valuable, there is a need to take a step back and explore what traditionally is associated with what the arts can do. The usual method for assessing art is by examining how much good it does for the individual or for society. This chapter demonstrates that art can indeed do many things for society and it certainly can be looked upon from the viewpoint of 'use' and 'benefit'. Sociological and psychological researches are introduced that demonstrate what 'good' art can offer. However, from the viewpoint of looking for potentials for effective change for today's world, I argue that this is not where the force of art should be sought. Most importantly, this is not where contemporary art should belong, as this approach to the 'benefit' of art keeps the arts within the very framework it ought to overcome.

Therefore, there is a need to get back to the initial proposition, namely to the question of whether art has the force to create an empty space of undefined potentials, since, for our times, this is the force with which it can contribute to the issues of the world.<sup>2</sup> Art as a 'force outside power-structure' is a concept that appears extensively in contemporary art theory. The nature of this force calls for a precise articulation though. Various scholars such as Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière perceive contemporary art as a way to challenge hegemony. However, although they claim interrogation, I propose that their theories still keep art embedded in the social fabric, and they seem to understand art's force according to and in relation with the logic of the power-structure it challenges. In other words, art that is important for them does not take the beholder outside hegemony, but remains on the critical level of power-structure.

Therefore, a different theory, namely 'art as force-field' will be introduced as understood by professor of comparative literature Krzysztof Ziarek (2004), which seems to me to be a real alternative to power-structure. It is suggested that art as a non-teleological field has common characteristics and a very similar dynamism with Malabou's term 'zero

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<sup>2</sup> At first reading, my approach might seem instrumentalist. My argument could be read as a need for change and that the arts can stand in the service of this change. If society wants to experience this change, it should/could use art. This could be the argument, but it does not need to be read like that, as the outcome of the change itself is not defined, projected, even anticipated. I simply argue that ground zero spaces are key for the adoption of a different mentality, and that such spaces also arise in a very particular way in some contemporary art practices.

point', or 'ground zero' as I alter it, and with the alternative space called for by the disciplines, namely (slow)science, eco criticism and New Materialism mentioned. Yet, there is something specific to contemporary art that distinguishes it from these disciplines, and this particularity is the potential of the personal experience. Let me start with the contextualization of the need for art by introducing ecological concerns.

## 1.2 Pressing matters



Fig.1. CO<sub>2</sub> growth since the Industrial Revolution (Credit: Vostok ice core data/J.R. Petit et al.; NOAA Mauna Loa CO<sub>2</sub> record.)

This part of the chapter addresses one of the most pressing concerns on Earth: climate change. Although it might sound strange to start a chapter on the need for (contemporary) art with ecology, it is argued that the need for contemporary art corresponds with finding alternative responses for the concerns of the planet. Ecological matters are not the topic of this book, but serve as a starting point to articulate the urgency of the research. So I will briefly introduce the ecological necessity to act and to act

differently to save the planet and life on Earth, in order to substantiate the need to adopt a different mindset. It is this different mindset, a 'think and exist differently', that I am interested in and in which contemporary art, I propose, can possibly help with this and other pressing matters.

Why do I introduce climate change and none of the other problems facing the planet? There are many great concerns in today's world and society. Different disciplines have different worries: teachers about the shrinking level of general knowledge, the effect of technology on the young mind, sociologists about the inability of the young generation to exist without apps or to think out of the box that techno-centric society is putting them into. Liberal politicians worry about the emerging right-wing tendencies across Europe, and global politics is concerned with Islam extremism. The list could go on, possibly endlessly. Among all these issues, one of the most pressing, is climate change. On a devastated planet, it is hard to worry about the effect of the World Wide Web or political affiliations when the existence of the very site that gives space for any kind of human activity is endangered. In the subsequent paragraphs I suggest looking into the reality of climate change in order to highlight how urgent it is for us to work out a different attitude in order to maintain life on Earth.

The chart presented above (fig.1.) demonstrates the rapid growth of CO<sub>2</sub> since the 1950s. The CO<sub>2</sub> level has never been this high. Scientists have now come to a general consensus that it is humankind that is destroying its own environment. The fate of the planet has become a common concern. The first statement on the NASA website (<http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>) voices this pressing issue: "Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities, and most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position".

There is no question anymore that the increased level of greenhouse gasses (CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, nitrous oxide, CFCs) causes the Earth to warm up. Consequently, there is a rapid rise in the sea level. Ten of the warmest years since the 1970s have occurred in the past twelve years and "surface temperature continues to rise". Ice sheets are also of major concern: "Data from NASA's Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment show Greenland lost 150 to 250 cubic kilometers (36 to 60 cubic miles) of ice per year between 2002 and 2006,



while Antarctica lost about 152 cubic kilometers (36 cubic miles) of ice between 2002 and 2005” (<http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>).

Extreme events take place, such as devastating storms, tornados, floods and seasons with temperatures unheard of until now. Oceans have so far been able to absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide, but even that is not without consequence as it changes the constitution of sea life, the intensity of currents and also global weather. Just to get an estimate on the numbers, one reads that “the amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by the upper layer of the oceans is increasing by about 2 billion tons per year” (<http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>).

Scientists have also calculated the expected effects of climate change at a regional level. For instance, in the Southwestern areas of the planet, natural phenomena that devastate the region will intensify: “Increased heat, drought, and insect outbreaks, all linked to climate change, have increased wildfires. Declining water supplies, reduced agricultural yields, health impacts in cities due to heat, and flooding and erosion in coastal areas are additional concerns” (<http://climate.nasa.gov/effects/>).

Among the many pressing factors, water is going to be a major issue. Although most of us are aware of this, there is not much that is being done in spite of the fact that an “analysis by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) ... found that 4.8 billion people – more than half the world’s population – and approximately half of global grain production will be at risk due to water stress by 2050 if status quo, business-as-usual behavior is followed (<http://growingblue.com/water-in-2050/>).

This means that in forty years from now, my generation and our children will either have or not have access to drinking water, and there is a 50 % chance that the quality and quantity of our food will be majorly altered because of climate change. In order to change things, more and more people, not only scientists and activists, but lay citizens need to realize that something has to be done if we want our children to have shelter, food and enough drinking water. We can no longer shy away from the urgency to actively start doing something to sustain life. Yet, as I see it, we are still ignoring the consequences of our actions, both individually and on a social scale, regarding both societal and ecological issues. Today there is still not a critical mass that could turn things around. Clearly, existing strategies and practices on how to conduct life on Earth are falling short. This critical mass should rise urgently, and as I see it, it should rise from below, from the masses. It does not

seem to be in the interest of the politicians in power to start effectively caring for nature; they would simply lose too many important votes from those still obsessed with growth, money and production.

Therefore there is a need to work out a different mindset that considers these pressing issues holistically, and which generates change from 'below', from a micro-social level, as opposed to being part of a meta-narrative, namely, laws and legislations developed for change from 'above'. There is no new recipe for saving and changing the planet, and so far any recipe invented by ruling elite has turned out to become (more or less) fascistic. In such a crisis, we certainly cannot afford another regime built around yet another dysfunctional utopia. What is to be done? Several disciplines have major concerns about issues such as climate change, and 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking seems to be finding a new voice and a new approach for coming up with decisions. And after all, this is what we need: a new attitude and mentality that people can embrace, in the realization that the old ways no longer work.

The subsequent paragraphs therefore briefly introduce a few of these possible alternative approaches. My intention is not to map the field, I rather aim to demonstrate that the kind of space (and mentality) I find most valuable for altering the course of events differently also surface in non-artistic disciplines.

### **1.3 Alternative perspectives – from structure to matter**

When looking for other than utilitarian, hegemony-driven application of a body of knowledge in academia, for instance, I detect two directions that I present through three examples. On the one hand, some professionals call for the redefinition of their own discipline, on the other hand they invent new disciplines where the newly outlined territory involves a non-teleological mentality. With this in mind, firstly, I propose to look into how the existing structure of science is criticized, and at the alternatives offered by scientists themselves. Secondly, I present two philosophy-based practices that have evolved with the intention of following a different logic from the production-oriented mindset.

When asking for solutions for most of the world's ills, people turn to science. Science, however, seems to be in the service of a technocratic world view that is concerned with short term solutions that usually serve momentary comfort, growth and gain. Many see the shortcomings of this attitude of science, and call for a revision of the mentality of the discipline as, in view of its consequences, we can no longer afford to follow this mindset.

For instance, scientist turned philosopher, Isabelle Stengers, shares this opinion. Stengers is deeply concerned with the direction science and scientific attitude is taking at the moment. In her article “‘Another science is possible!’ A plea for slow science’ (2011), Stengers distinguishes between ‘fast’ and ‘slow science’.<sup>3</sup> She defines slow science as “resisting the fast, competitive, benchmarked research” and draws an analogy with the term, ‘slow food’, as against fast, bad quality and ‘ready to eat’ food and the system that produces it (2011:2). As opposed to slow science, fast science is a detached, production-oriented endeavor based on research and is dictated by the industry that pays the research laboratories. In fast science, she argues, there is no space or time to take into consideration the matters of the world, to ponder or to make mistakes, but instead the scientists serve the interest of growth and technology and produce results, data or facts for satisfying the expectations of the industry. About the present and the future of fast science and its vulnerability to economic interest, she writes: “... we may well have scientists at work everywhere, producing facts with the speed that new sophisticated instruments make possible, but the way those facts will be interpreted will mostly confirm the landscape of settled interests” (2011:9).

In other words, fast science for industry is serving pre-set interests often detached from the concerns of the world. As opposed to serving industry and profiting a wealthy few, slow science, for Stengers, is an alternative attitude, towards repositioning science for social relevance. This, she argues, still needs to be implemented, as it is not yet part of the scientific platform. Be it a fast scientist or a researcher detached from the world in his/her lab, their ignorance towards the state of things is striking. Stengers mentions a scientist who felt “quite justified when claimed that GMOs were the rational solution for feeding the

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<sup>3</sup> Slow science can be associated with the larger ‘slow’ movement (<http://www.slowmovement.com/>), recently becoming popular, or it can be seen as a natural initiative of scientists concerned with the world and worrying about the future of their discipline.

hungry, quietly ignoring the social and economical mechanisms creating hunger in our world” (2011:8).<sup>4</sup>

In both cases, if scientists stay isolated from the concerns of the world, without considering the larger picture and the far-reaching consequences of their research, scientific endeavor might indeed become morally questionable. For instance, if a diet pill is invented that makes people lose 10kg a month without eating less or exercising, the pill is put on to the market. Although possible side-effects might be shown on the box, fast science would treat the pill as a positive achievement, a contribution to health without giving second thoughts to possible secondary side-effects or psychological implications, ignoring questions such as is it really ‘good’ to be able to lose 10kg a month by simply popping a pill.

Therefore, in order for science to be able to contribute to the ‘things-of-the-world’, including the fate of the planet, it has to remain in touch with them. This is what slow science aims to offer. Stengers claims slow science represents the quality of research that keeps in mind its relevance for today’s issues, including a focus on the community (2011:2). She argues that slow science should be carried out through cooperation, fusion and hybridization of various kinds of science, and also the involvement of other disciplines. She writes: “What of slow meetings, that is meetings that are organized in such a way that participation is not formal only? What of slow talks...? ... learning and collaboration...?” (2011:12). There is a need for a more “demanding trust”, a demanding engagement in which time is spent on arguing and clashing opinions and coming *or not coming* to a common ground. This is an attitude I greatly sympathize with, as, although Stengers has clear expectations for science to take social responsibility, she is also calling for the establishment of a non-teleological platform for exchange of ideas.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> GMO – genetically modified organism – in agriculture has been introduced to grow healthier, more adaptive and resistant crops.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, Stengers admits that universities cannot survive without working for the fast science industry. However, we might be able to learn “... on the one hand, adhering to a rule and, on the other, recognizing its power while looking for the opportunities to experiment outside its bounds”, in other words, think out of the box, “creating interstices where another science could discover its own demands” (2011:12). This new behavior seems to be in line with the slow science manifesto that reads (<http://slow-science.org/>): “We do need time to think. We do need time to digest. We do need time to misunderstand each other, especially when fostering lost dialogue between humanities and natural sciences. We cannot continuously tell you what our science means; what it will be good for; because we simply don’t know yet. Science needs time. —*Bear with us, while we think.*”

This 'slow' attitude of contradictions, interdisciplinarity, dialogues, time and also space to think and contrast opinions, outside the binding capitalist hegemony is a phenomenon voiced by Stengers. It is this need to create a *space* in which various disciplines and approaches can come together, without knowing what will come out of that cooperation that I also see the need for, in this society of crisis. Stengers is not alone with these concerns within the domain of science. For instance, one of her colleagues who juxtaposes Stengers' concerns and takes the matter further is the philosopher, Jeffrey Burkhardt. In his article, 'Scientific values and moral education in the teaching of science' (1999) Burkhardt argues that the scientific community is actually trained at university to unquestionably serve the interests of capital, in other words, hegemony. He argues that "institutionalized science and science education are essentially results-driven enterprises" in which "science is legitimated by its solutions" (1999:6). He adds that "scientific institutions have implicitly endorsed an internal form of productionism, whose goal is the equivalent of the 'maximum yield' goals of ... research: maximum physical products, information, and, of course, human capital" (1999:7).

According to Burkhardt, universities are expected to train human capital whose skills and knowledge are fit for and fit into the production chain for which it was designed. He writes: "They may be educating people in classical terms, but they are also training people to be task-oriented, punctual, and good at rule-following. The formal institutional nature of instruction in even marginally useful subjects such as philosophy is no less acculturating to the culture of modern market capitalist society than is study in business or science" (1999:3).

Burkhardt argues that students are schooled according to the mentalities of a production chain under the 'cover' of learning science. However, what really is communicated to them is not science and the scientific mentality Stenger outlines, but a productionist frame of mind that Stengers identifies with fast science. Burkhardt argues that "... in the process of doing and teaching the sciences, people are teaching and learning 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of being'. ... suffice it to say that a deep learning and deep reinforcement of beliefs and attitudes occurs along with the transmission of technical facts and methods" (1999:5).

In other words, a productionist mentality underlies education. This hidden attitude is communicated to the science student as what he calls "scientific productionism", the idea

that “science should continually produce more ‘output’”, namely measurable data to be used by the industry (1999:6).

This expectation from scientific output is not new, though, but has been traditionally embedded in science. As s Burkhardt states “...even before the modern institutionalization of science, scientists were seen as performing an important social function: to generate knowledge in order to improve the material well-being of human beings, with a particular eye towards increased human control over nature or natural processes” (1999:6). Which shows therefore that this scientific attitude embraces domination, patriarchal control and the mastering of nature that is juxtaposed by the principles of capitalism.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is this particular human control that is about to lead us into very unpleasant situations (to say the least). Therefore, this mentality calls for revision. Again, I feel that there is a need to emphasize that the ego-driven attitude based on production and short-term benefit imposed by hegemony could be overcome if humankind consciously created forums into which other-than such alternative motivations have a chance to materialize. . Neither Stengers nor Burkhardt want to see the end of productionism but they call for the introduction of other than scientific values to the scientific discourse in order to bring scientists back to what Stengers calls ‘slow’ science, in which scientists also see the larger picture of the world. Or, as Burkhardt puts it: “The point may be... that the scientific enterprise is not only about discovery of the world ‘out here’. ... it is also about discovery ‘in here’...” (1999:16).

As these examples show, there are some members of the scientific community calling for a new mentality within science that would help reconnect the discipline with the ‘things-of-the-world’. Both authors mentioned are demanding an other-than utilitarian use of science and the establishment of interdisciplinary forums for science to integrate into the community. Therefore, these approaches can be seen as an alternative way of thinking, outside the current hegemonic framework. At the same time, they do propose a solution, even though it is not direct and prescriptive. Nonetheless, in terms of attitude, I see a parallel between the nature of non-teleological space in contemporary art, that I am about to outline, and the author’s imagined operation in the establishment of non-hegemonic forums. These operations do not serve productionist interests, ordered from above, but allow organic growth from below, that dictates and follows its own laws and needs.

The discipline that is also in line with the ideas of these two scientists in terms of calling for a different attitude, is eco criticism. Although the field is vast, I am concentrating on it from the viewpoint of its criticism of hegemony and the evocation of non-prescriptive space for decision-making. Timothy Morton's major work on eco criticism, entitled *Ecology without nature* (2007) voices urgent and critical concerns right at the beginning: "Old ways of thinking, we tell ourselves, are not to be trusted. They helped to get us into this mess in the first place. In virtual reality it becomes impossible to count on an idea of 'distance'. We feel that we can't achieve a critical purchase, but are instead about to be dissolved into a psychotic aquarium of hallucinatory un-being" (Morton 2007:26).

Morton departs from the usual critical point arguing that the "old ways of" technocratic thinking are leading us towards a psychotic mentality of hyperreality in which we completely disconnect from the things-of-the-world and from issues that need to be urgently addressed. Calling for a change is the departure point of eco criticism that urges the adaptation of other than productionist mindsets. This approach is in line with what has been voiced above, but takes the arguments still further, therefore getting us closer to outlining the space contemporary art might be able to create. Let me explain.

Eco criticism is a revisionist movement in which scholars of the humanities decided to apply their knowledge to the non-human world and address environmental issues and crises.<sup>6</sup> The diversity of this discipline calls for interdisciplinarity "where work on nature writing can sit comfortably next to animal studies, and postcolonial theory rubs shoulders with ecofeminism" and "history, philosophy, sociology and science studies, and not least... ecology and the life sciences" are included (Bergthaller, <http://www.easlce.eu/about-us/what-is-ecocriticism/>).

When looking into how eco criticism is carried out, one can detect similarities with the new scientific attitude articulated by Stengers and Burkhardt, yet their argument is taken further. For instance, literary scholar, Eoin Flannery, in his article, 'Ireland and eco criticism: an introduction' in the *Journal of ecocriticism* (2015) looks at how land is regarded in 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Eco criticism roots in Romanticism and since then "it has ... broadened to address the question, in all of its dimensions, how cultures construct and are in turn constructed by the non-human world" (Bergthaller, <http://www.easlce.eu/about-us/what-is-ecocriticism/>). Alternative titles, but different in terms of their approach and political affiliations, for such a way of thinking would be environmental/ecological literary studies or green cultural studies.

century Ireland. He argues that, due to the increasing capitalistic demand for production, land is treated simply as property and exploited for short-term market interests. Maintenance, care, and sustainability become secondary, which most probably leads to ecological harm. Flannery therefore calls for a reestablishment of the bond with the land, but not according to the Romantic ideals of the past or by following the new-found conservatism, but in a reestablishment of “dwelling knowingly in a specific place” (2015:3).

This “dwelling knowingly” is a mentality in line with new science, in the sense that it takes the focus off the ‘above’-imposed order, and calls for attention on to the ‘below’. In order to substantiate this move, Flannery introduces the term ‘microspeciation’ meaning a sensitivity to the local and, most importantly for this research, for going at a slower pace, and creating practices that are generated from below, in this case, literally from the ground.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when deciding on matters concerning ‘dwelling knowingly’, Flannery encourages the incorporation of other-than-scientific partners. This he sees in ‘other than cognitive’ elements, suggesting a concentration on, for instance, *physical knowledge*, as dwelling is a physical act.

Although ‘physical knowledge’ might not sound like a radical factor when making decisions, it actually is, because in order for the physical to become a decisive player, there is a need to abandon body-mind dualism: a way of thinking we have been used to in the West for centuries. From here another step should be made, so I introduce the philosophical, yet very much practice-oriented direction in line with this attitude and need for shift: New Materialism.

This relatively new discipline represents a worldview, a method of thinking, an analysis of texts, philosophy as well as practice that has been gaining particular attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. New Materialism does not limit itself to a particular field of research but deals with nature, art, society, politics or thoughts in general. Most importantly, the discipline “has set itself to practice the Spinozist dictum that the mind is always already an idea of the body, while the body is the object of the mind” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin

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<sup>7</sup> Flannery argues: “[...] we must now think of liberation as going deeper, lower. In other words, in advocating this shift of perspective, we wish to suggest that it is possible to develop a new politics of microspeciation which seeks to expand the possibilities of the local, not reduce them, and which offers the opportunity to reconfigure positively our social, economic and political experience of the fundamentals of space and time” (2015:3).



2012:91). This quote suggests that mind and body, and consequentially any kind of dualism, is a fictional interpretation of the world: the mind is the product of the body and the body is the projection of the mind; the two cannot be separated, just like meaning cannot be separated from matter.<sup>8</sup>

Why is it important from the viewpoint of this research that dualism is rejected? As I suggested previously, if one can go beyond dualism, the structures according to which we build our lives simply fall short. Philosophers Rich Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin explain this in terms of New Materialism: “new materialism engenders *immanent* thought and, as a consequence, it breaks through not only the mind-matter and culture-nature divides of transcendental humanist thought, but *also thinking, causal structures and teleology (i.e. a determinism)*” (2012:96, italics, DV).

What emerges then if thoughts, decisions and actions are not derivatives of dualism? The answer, as one would expect from New Materialism is very ‘organic’: “... beneath every object, every representation, every physical of metaphysical ideality lies a phenomenon, which is the flesh and blood of the world, the life that continues to live in and through being as it is represented in itself. This is being as it is *lived*” (Beistegui quoted in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012:109).

In this sense, once beyond the dualism of representation-represented, there is a force, a life that is experienced in its materiality. New Materialism sees this force in the nature of matter and argues that “matter is a transformative force *in itself*, which, in its ongoing change, will not allow any representation to take root” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012:107). As the authors put it, and we shall see it recurring in the philosophy of Catherine Malabou, “*anti-representationalism* (an immanent gesture) is employed” in order to break through matter-meaning, content-form dualism through which the world – and also art – is perceived (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012:98). Matter then is thought to have a potential, an agency that manifests in action *without being predefined*. New Materialism even uses the terminology ‘agency’ and argues that “matter comes into agential realism” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012:113).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Aside from Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari are often cited along with Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘naturecultures’ and Bruno Latour’s idea of ‘collectives’. Central to the ideas of these thinkers is the call for a non-dualist attitude.

<sup>9</sup> These ideas reoccur in the attitude toward art when seen as agency in the work of Alfred Gell and WJT Mitchell who also treat the artwork as entity in itself with an agency, and whose ideas I adopt as the

In other words, New Materialists see matter as ‘force in itself’. Therefore, in order to come to yet unknown alternatives for living our lives, as opposed to squeezing practices and phenomena – those we would identify as ‘matter’ - into one superimposed order, one needs to create space for them to exercise *the force that is embedded in their own nature*.

I have arrived at the base of these arguments, namely to the potential of matter that is beyond order. As I see it, ‘matter as force’ can generate a space in which the things-of-the-world have the liberty to arrive without any imposed structure and can be an alternative to hegemony. As it is this space that I consider as the potential for change, and which I also see emerging in particular ways in some contemporary art, it is necessary to articulate its precise nature. Let me now outline this non-teleological forum itself through the ideas of French philosopher, Catherine Malabou.

#### **1.4 Ground zero**

It is interesting to see that the disciplines cited, when realizing that there is a dire need for a change in attitude in order to solve the ills of the planet, come up with well-founded arguments for the generation of non-defined *space*. As I have suggested, in order to create yet unknown alternatives, there is a great need to generate open spaces, where the things of the world can reveal themselves in their (possibly endless) complexity. These open platforms in which yet unknown ways of being in the world can surface, are states of emptiness, zero points or, as I slightly alter it, ‘ground zero’. In her paper, *Whither materialism? Althusser/Darwin* (2013), Malabou argues in terms similar to those alternative disciplines are calling for. Given that patterns we have been using so far obviously do not work, we need a new method that she sees in the making of creative spaces that admit non-teleological experiences that aid us to think (and exist) outside already taken-for-granted structures. This could give rise to a new attitude towards the world and possibly provide an alternative means for making decisions. Starting her argument from a New Materialist perspective, Malabou (2013) springs her analysis from nature and matter, presenting a take on the Darwinian evolution-theory which she parallels with Althusser's notion of socio-

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foundation of this research. But before I introduce that, there is still a need to look at an important idea of New Materialism.

political order. I will present this briefly in order to explain where the nature of what she calls 'zero point' might lie.

Malabou argues that the Darwinian idea of evolution is misinterpreted and that Darwin never wanted to call his theory 'evolution' in the first place. The general interpretation suggests that Darwin, when thinking about the concept of natural selection, survival of the fittest and so on, had a *teleological* goal in mind. Therefore, Darwin's suggestion that 'the fittest survive in the best conditions' is a phenomenon that takes place according to specific criteria, and that one understands what 'fit' and "best conditions" represent, in advance. Malabou suggests that this is a false interpretation of Darwin, as what 'fit' represents and what 'the best conditions' stand for, are only apparent *after* the selection has been made. As she argues: "There is no better 'in itself.' Certainly, Darwin described natural selection as a 'work of perfecting' or as an 'improvement,' but these notions of 'better' remain without intention" (2013:8).

In other words, concepts, such as 'fit', are independent from value-judgments. Furthermore, one cannot come up with prescribed criteria according to which the selection is going to happen: one can only learn what exists, adapts or survives under specific circumstances *after* the encounter takes place. As Malabou puts it: "The best is the fittest, but aptitude is here independent of all value judgments or all actual teleology. ... Natural selection is a-teleological, without intention. ... natural selection is paradoxically non-anticipatable, a promise of forms never chosen in advance, of differences to come" (2013:6).

In other words, Malabou understands that according to Darwin the working of nature never takes place according to rules, structure and criteria already present 'out there'. One can never tell in advance what will survive and be able to adapt to specific conditions. What does survive only becomes apparent in the moment of and during the encounter: in its emergence, and not before that.

Why is this idea relevant for this research? Malabou continues by detecting the exact same teleological materialism projected on to society, as on to nature. She argues that in the same way as we perceive nature, we also make society work according to predefined, set criteria, trying to adjust and curtail the things-of-the-world to the structures we treat as taken-for-granted, but which, in fact, were invented by us and later applied as rules. "The formation of forms — forms of life; forms of thought, forms of society — is governed by an internal tension toward a *telos*, which necessarily orients and determines every self-

development. ... Such a materialism presupposes that everything is accomplished in advance; the structure precedes its elements and reproduces them in order to reproduce the structure” (2013:4).

Malabou explains that society pretends to know what forms should manifest, and creates structures that assume that forms will emerge somehow, according to prescribed criteria. As she says: “The catalogue of tasks, the outline of jobs, the protocol of exams always precede the real encounter with the variability and diversity of candidates, thus preventing differences from emerging by themselves” (2013:10).

This juxtaposes what has been suggested before, namely the fact that structure is imposed on ‘matter’ from above, it does not spring from matter itself. There is no freedom for forms to emerge that could bring something new, to change the hegemonic system, but society already carries within itself a value-system that forms ought to follow. This teleological approach, claimed to be adopted from evolution theory, ironically even contradicts the current understanding of Darwinism, as in this system it is not going to be the best and fittest that are selected, but those that play the best according to the set rules. “It is not the best that are selected, or even those that exhibit an astonishing capacity for adaptation, but those who are the most conformable” argues Malabou (2013:11).

What is the problem with this approach towards life? Malabou (2013:11) points out that “nameless individuals” will never have the chance to emerge outside the already existing structures, and come up with new forms. Therefore, there is no space left for the introduction of new alternatives.<sup>10</sup> Teleological structures always impose reproduction as opposed to production. Furthermore, order from above easily forces its self-interest on to ‘matter’, with no consideration for what matter would dictate by itself. Although one can see the sad consequences of such decision-making, this attitude can work for a while in times when there is no a need for radically new approaches. One can put up with this violation of possibilities of “encounter... by teleology, anteriority of meaning, presuppositions, predeterminations” (Malabou 2013:7).

However, I argue that in times such as ours, we cannot afford such castration of chances for the emergence of change. As Malabou argues and I agree: “As soon as selection becomes an intention of selection, which supposes predefined criteria, certainly

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<sup>10</sup> These teleological structures influence the arts as well; we know what good music is supposed to sound like and to some extent we can define what good art is supposed to represent.

programmed this time, as soon as there is no more naturality or spontaneity in the promotion, the plastic condition is threatened or even inexistent” (2013:7). Looking at the working of society, it is quite obvious that the possible birth of new alternatives is suffocated at its core, which under the current circumstances we can no longer afford. Therefore, the task is a given: there is a need to re-establish those states of emptiness in which the encounter, the unexpected and the unpredictable can emerge with its own potential. Malabou asks: “... *where, in society, is the void, the nothingness, the point zero from which a form can emerge?*” (2013:4, italics, DV). She sees the *space of nothingness* in the ability to allow encounter without teleological implications. As one might recall, similar encounters were advocated by Stengers, and I argue that these, specifically, are the spaces that we must engage with. As Malabou puts it, our job is to “*free the ... repressed status of ... nothingness and to reveal it as... formative...*” (2013:15, italics, DV). Nothingness – existence without pre-imposed structure – has endless possibilities that should not be forced into structure according to already existing social models. She, therefore, calls for the sensibility and sensitivity to let such empty spaces emerge in which things can spring without us implying a priori structure upon them, because it is in these spaces that creativity can take place. I argue that this is our social duty right now, namely the creation of such spaces. Malabou concludes her paper along these lines: “Opening the unassignable place in a global world, where every place is assigned, has become the most urgent ethical and political task” (2013:16).

In other words, when thinking holistically and trying to find solutions for problems that concern entities of such a grand scale as the human race or the planet, we cannot afford to think and make decisions that operate in this teleological one-way street. We cannot afford yet another set of hegemonic theories, a ‘map’ of the planet only to be overthrown by coming generations. We cannot invent another meta-narrative, thinking that it is going to point to better solutions. We simply do not have the time for it. So this approach of not-telling, questioning, or as Morton (2007) puts it “non-identity”, a way of not stating but *giving space*, has to be incorporated into the attitude of science, the humanities and into forums of social decision-making in order to make change possible.

For this research I would like to apply Malabou’s concept of ‘zero point’ to contemporary art. Malabou talks about ‘zero point’ that – to me – symbolizes emptiness, a

vacuum of space and time, without dimensions, yet with a huge amount of potential. Having engaged with specific contemporary artworks, I have noticed that there is indeed such a potential of nothingness. I suggest a slight alteration to this term, though, and instead of calling it 'zero point', I would rather title this empty space of potential 'ground zero'. In the case of this research, I believe this alteration is justified, as I would like to suggest that, instead of a '*point*' there is *dimension*, in other words, *space*: space that can exist beyond hegemony. In the engagement with art, it *feels* like space, rather than a point, a vacuum. 'Ground' is therefore a more suitable word than 'point' to connote space. .

I am, at the same time, aware that the term 'ground zero' is heavy with connotations from current history. Most people would associate it with the tragedy of 9/11 in the United States, with the collapse of the Twin Towers. Undoubtedly, 9/11 was one of the great tragedies of humankind that is not to be debated - and it does not even occur to me to suggest that acts as such might have other than devastating impacts.<sup>11</sup> Still, I adopt this term because I find that it implies space that is completely empty and lies at the bottom of/beyond all structure. Furthermore, if I look at the collapse of the towers *strictly metaphorically*, and if one can deduct the horrendous trauma that it induced, to me 'ground zero' signifies the consequence of the destruction of order and structure imposed on the world by modernist, European values, driven by capitalism. Consequentially, 'ground zero' is not only the symbol of the space that remains after the collapse of the social values mentioned, but it also stands for the individual without any structure, any superimposed form of power, in other words, without the ego. 'Ground zero' in this research therefore represents a *space* beyond order and structure, a space of retreat beyond the ego-boundaries. In this sense, 'ground zero' - although reaching it might be difficult or even painful - becomes the *potential space for new life to emerge*. One can spend time in this space, with the liberty to see and confront yet unknown features of what one identifies as oneself.

The question that needs to be addressed now is how all this involves the arts? Where does art step into this picture and – most importantly from the viewpoint of this

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<sup>11</sup> The sensitivity of this argument recurs later in Chapter Four when the infamous commentaries of German composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, on 9/11 are discussed. Although, from the viewpoint of art, Stockhausen appears to celebrate this act, I argue that from life cannot emerge from trauma. The space of trauma is frozen and dead, whereas ground zero is the potential of life.

research – how can contemporary art have a say in the creation of such non-teleological space? The subsequent sub-chapters shift the attention on to art and its potential.

### Shifting to art

How can art make a difference in a world that currently views artistic practices and art appreciation as a luxurious pastime of the privileged elite? Where and on what platforms could art possibly make a difference? The reason why art is problematic when it comes to involving it in decision-making about the world, is because of the general goal-oriented mindset of the world, dictated, according to Stengers and Burkhardt, by the current productionist attitude. This mentality of classifying values is necessarily intertwined with political decision-making, with the distribution of funds and consequentially with allowing only certain disciplines to have a say in decision-making, excluding others. In other words, as practice shows, no matter how the 'benefit of art' is understood, it is not necessarily in the interest of decision-makers to invite art practitioners into forums of judgment, on the grounds that art's primary interest does not lie in the generation of fast profit. So the general conceptualization of the arts excludes it from decision-making, on the grounds that art does not have straightforward relevance when deciding on matters of the world which are currently associated with profit and gain. This implies that in our society, when pressing concerns have to be dealt with, it has not been the practice to involve the arts. Indeed, although some theorists, arguing for the use of art, have demonstrated that the arts have value for augmenting performance, I agree that if the value of art is to be defined on an instrumentalist basis within the structure of hegemony, it is difficult to come up with solid arguments that firmly stand their ground.

However, what humankind needs to master for our society is an other-than-instrumentalist attitude towards the world. I argue that art, especially contemporary art, is able to aid us in mastering this new mentality. Where does this 'different attitude' originate? As I see it, the contemporary art that is able to make a difference – not from the viewpoint of hegemony, but from the perspective of overthrowing it - does not work under terminologies such as 'use', 'gain', 'purpose', 'method', 'structure' and so on, simply because it is part of a different discourse. The fast scientific approach wants measurable data that

proves that there has been 'growth' and 'development'. However, in the contemporary art practices I am referring to, these principles make no sense whatsoever. The contemporary art I have in mind as of key importance for today's matters does not know quantitative research. It is not about truth claims and falsities. It is created from an urge to show, to reveal, for a large variety of reasons, but not with 'a' specific goal in mind. Such contemporary art is a reflective/contemplative but very much action-based practice in which there is no specific target. In most cases, the scientific mentality operates with truth claims and expects proof that can be tested, proven right or wrong. Art in general cannot be proven right or wrong. There can be successful art, good artworks versus bad pieces, but we cannot judge them according to the categories used by the rationalist, capitalist, fast scientific mentality. I therefore argue that what science and the humanities can learn from contemporary art is the very attitude or mentality that the previously mentioned philosophers and scientists also demand, especially because, as I demonstrate below, this is the attitude that is in the very nature of some contemporary art.

Furthermore, such contemporary art practices are able to open up this space of non-dualism, non-identity in other words they point towards 'ground zero' types of experience. These practices are the subject of this research, as I see a huge potential in them. Because they manage to go beyond discourse, they are able to open up a space, as will be shown below, and has already been suggested by Malabou, that is a 'force beyond form'. Therefore, they are a kind of power that does not manifest into a system, an alternative structure as we know it, and consequently does not become a world view. It is important to emphasize that this 'going beyond the discursive' might be one of the key attributes of contemporary art, leading us into an 'embodiment', namely an other than cognitive engagement.

Let me take one step at a time, though, and clarify first what the force of art is associated with, in general. Subsequently, I will discuss theories on the force of contemporary artistic practices. As well as referring to prominent thinkers, I will present what I see as the force of contemporary art that manifests the attitude so necessary for our world today.



### Art for social and individual good

Much research has been conducted into the 'use' and 'benefit' of art for the individual and society. Such instrumentalist perspectives on art that explore what art is good for, explore the value of art within the given social framework. Although such an approach keeps and evaluates art strictly within the given social order, for example how it helps to establish and sustain hegemony, this type of research exists and is often used as an argument for taking the arts seriously, applying for grants and support or simply treating it as a legitimate discipline, alongside sciences and the humanities. Therefore, although this approach towards the arts will not be adopted in this research, it is briefly introduced in order to highlight its dynamism and shortcomings.

'How the arts impact communities?' was the title of a paper on the measurement of the impact of culture, given by Joshua Guetzkow, professor of sociology, at a Princeton University conference in 2002<sup>12</sup>. Countless researches have been conducted into the benefit of art, from the perspective of both active and passive participation.<sup>13</sup> Among these, Guetzkow's research focused on three statements; first, that the arts improve social capital; second, that they have a positive effect on the economy; and finally that they are good for individuals.

When referring to social capital, Guetzkow was looking at community art programs in which people, often with some type of social disadvantage, would participate in projects designed for community improvement (e.g. the creation of a more tolerant environment). He mentions a few tangible outcomes of involvement in art projects, such as "fostering trust between participants and thereby increasing the generalized trust of others, ... increasing their sense of connection to that community, ...learning technical and interpersonal skills important for collective organizing" and so on (2002:6).

Researchers usually see the economic benefit of the arts in the (in)direct financial outcome of art events such as concerts, theatre and other ticket sales, festivals of all kinds

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<sup>12</sup> Taking the Measure of Culture Conference Princeton University June 7-8, 2002

<sup>13</sup> Here I think of a wide range of study. Just to name a few: on the benefit of art education for children (see: [http://www.heritage1886.org/new/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=197:positive-benefits-of-art&catid=22&Itemid=59](http://www.heritage1886.org/new/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=197:positive-benefits-of-art&catid=22&Itemid=59) ), on the benefit of art for public health (see: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2804629/>), the achievements of art therapy is available on various forums, or the RAND corporation studies highlight (often instrumentally) the beneficial aspects of involvement with the arts (see: <http://www.rand.org/topics/performing-arts.html>).

with relatively high entrance fees or block-buster exhibitions. All these events are very likely to generate revenue, help in the growth of tourism and show sponsors of the event in a different light, that can be used for marketing purposes (Guetzkow 2002).

However, the impact of the arts on business is manifold and the merging of the two above, art's social capital and its economic benefit, can result in outstanding performance. Those who think about business with an artistic mindset are capable of bringing unique insights into the world of economic affairs. As László Láng (2014) the chancellor of International Business School, Budapest, argues:

Business facts, figures and theories must be translated into an alternative future or action. We are moving beyond the information age when analytical skills were required for this translation, into the conceptual age where the required skills are things like empathy, creating symphonies, storytelling, making meaning beyond numbers, etc. By enhancing such skills, arts may open up the mind to this conceptual process of translation, and thus increase business success.<sup>14</sup>

When referring to individuals, it is stated that the arts can help improve health, skills and cultural capital. Various tests have been created to measure such impact, one of these is the 'Mozart effect' that demonstrates that listening to Mozart or other "similar stimuli show improved performance on visuo-spatial reasoning". It is also a fact that children involved in artistic activities or receiving education with an artistic focus (e.g. the Waldorf-school) perform much better in other disciplines and in their future careers (Guetzkow 2002:11).<sup>15</sup>

Guetzkow convincingly demonstrates various ways the arts enhance human performance. Nonetheless, there is a problem not only with the argument, something that Guetzkow also realizes, namely, how do we know that it is the arts that have to be supported and not other type of social endeavors? He argues: "From a policy perspective, ...

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<sup>14</sup> Email correspondence, 2015, Budapest.

<sup>15</sup> Again, understandably, there is a lot of skepticism regarding these statistics. Firstly, how do we really know that the arts helped in this or that problem/issue. Research relies solely on accounts of the participants who have volunteered to give their opinion. Furthermore, how do we know that other, non-art activities would not have resulted in an equally beneficial outcome. As Guetzkow (2002) argues: "The fundamental question here is whether impact can be *measured* solely or largely on the basis of these accounts, especially considering that participants almost always self-select into participation. What would happen if people were randomly assigned into an "arts treatment" group?"

the issue is no longer whether the existence of the arts has a beneficial impact, but whether money spent on arts programs will have *more* of an impact than other programs” (2002:18).

This problem is very pressing in current society in which funds for activities (seemingly) outside the economy are becoming more and more scarce. According to Guetzkow (2002:18), the question we need to answer is not whether “did this program work at all” but “did this program work better than another?” How do we know that in order to master creative living we need the arts and not a good therapist or a coach?

Are arts programs for at-risk youth more effective than the Boy Scouts or midnight basketball? Do arts programs draw people away from other high impact activities in which they would otherwise be involved, such as environmental activism or charity; would public money be better spent on things like transportation infrastructure or police? (Guetzkow 2002:18)

There are many problems with such arguments. Aside from never clarifying what is meant by the term, ‘art’<sup>16</sup>, Guetzkow presents an *instrumentalist* view of the arts and explores how they are able to make us become even better citizens, part of the power-game that has gotten us into the problems we are now trying to climb out of. Furthermore, it keeps the arts in an apologetic position, hinting that art indeed needs to come up with arguments for its legitimate existence; it is not a given that the arts are entitled to be supported. Nonetheless, this is the way that the arts are often approached, so a few more lines need to be dedicated to arguments sprouting from a similar attitude.

John Carey, professor of literature at Oxford University, has a chapter in his book, *What good are the arts?* (2005:96) entitled ‘Do the arts make us better?’. While working within the broad concept of art, and with an instrumentalist attitude, he touches on a very sensitive terrain and highlights the complexity of the answer to his question. He reaches back to Aristotle and argues that Aristotle considered the arts were the part of education that had the capacity to lift the moral qualities of the viewer. This argument on ‘art for the betterment of humankind’ became especially powerful during Romanticism when thinkers such as Kant, Schiller, Schleiermacher and others attributed an almost supernatural, prophetic power to art

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<sup>16</sup> Should we understand community art projects for the nurturing of a particular neighborhood or the minimalist sculptures of Donald Judd under the term ‘art’? Surely the two have a different impact on very different audiences.

and named the artist the new 'messiah'. The artist as a new prophet was able to lead humankind to a new, happy, transcendental, perfect society of the abstract God figure. These and other theories (such as Theosophy) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century influenced a lot of artists and creative thinkers such as the Russian Suprematists, Constructivists, the De Stijl artists and architects, Rudolph Steiner and followers, the Bauhaus to some extent and modernist architecture in general.<sup>17</sup>

Carey (2005:97,98) points out that this ability of the arts to lift the moral spirit was not only the mission of philosophers or artists but was also present in 19<sup>th</sup> century institutional practices, such as making the entrance to public collections free of charge or in designating Trafalgar Square as the new centre of the National Gallery, so the poor could also walk in. This might indeed be the case, and unconsciously one might agree with this attitude towards the arts, namely that art is able to lead us to some kind of spiritual revelation, to some kind of 'enlightenment'. But is this really the case?

By relying on psychological studies, such as the *Psychology of the arts* by Hans and Shulamith Kreidler (1972), Carey (2005:101,102) demonstrates that there is no reason to think that the arts will produce any behavioral changes, and nor is there direct proof that the arts can help us in any way to become 'better' or 'happier' human beings. Needless to say, Hitler himself was a fanatic art lover and painter, and the case of John Paul Getty is also striking (2005:129,130).<sup>18</sup> No, Hitlers and Getties will not become different kinds of human being just because they engage passionately with the arts. However, other statistics prove that the arts can interfere with violent personality traits; art workshops held in prisons helped to reduce the violence rate by 20%, and while the prisoners took part in the project, one detention centre reported a 58% decrease in offensive behavior. As these data show, the arts can help reduce violence rates, help self-expression, give a pathway to the safe flow of pain and anxiety and help the growth of self and social respect that detainees have issues with (2005:155-162).

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<sup>17</sup> It has to be noted that these philosophers were not instrumentalizing the arts; on the contrary, they saw the arts as a means of breaking through and overcoming the current social framework (see for instance: Steiner, Rudolf. (2003). *The Arts and Their Mission*, II. 1923. in *Art, an Introductory Reader*. New York: Sophia Books, an imprint of Rudolf Steiner Press).

<sup>18</sup> Getty was a dedicated art collector and founded a museum now bearing his name, in California. Getty thought that those who did not have the taste for art were barbarians and belonged to a lower caste in society. He stated that these people should be transported into remote areas to live, welfare should be withdrawn and they should be prevented from population growth so state birth control should be imposed by force in order to prevent the overpopulation of the useless individuals of society (Carey 2005).

Carey (2005:115,116) returns to 'real life', though, and brings a counter-example when quoting Heaney, who argues that poetry improves people as it stirs deep acoustic memories, but many of the boys in his classroom who were passionate about poetry still ended up in the IRA, killing and blowing up people.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, even Carey acknowledges that the arts really have the ability to do something and generate change. He suggests, and I tend to agree, that the arts help in leading one back to the bodily union one experiences during infancy, namely that there is no sharp distinction between the outside world and the body. He writes: "The natural sense of oneness between the body and the outside world is '*another way of cutting up the universe*', an alternative to the objective, scientific way, and it is the artist's way as well as the young child's" (2005:111, italics, DV).<sup>20</sup>

The important part of Carey's approach from the viewpoint of this research is his argument about the arts providing "another way of cutting up the universe". As I have already suggested, the art that should be listened to today is the art that questions the steady and safe social bond, so it 'cuts up the universe differently'. The value of art for me lies precisely in its ability to generate thinking *outside* the social frame, the very cage that rationalist, instrumentalist teleological thinking is making tighter and tighter by mapping the world. Ironically, in this case, the 'use' and 'benefit' of the arts is not going to be grasped from an instrumentalist viewpoint, as this 'outside' is not conceptualized within the value-system of the current society. Therefore, such instrumentalist apprehension of the arts has to be surmounted if one wishes to explore what the arts can really do for 21<sup>st</sup> century society. I suggest that the 'use' and 'benefit' of art for us today is the very ability of art to overcome the very paradigms (such as 'use' and 'benefit'), in other words the very structure in which art has been traditionally understood as means for a social good.

Before I move on to what this 'outside' might represent and how the force of art is able to take the beholder beyond current hegemony, thereby offering an alternative for

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<sup>19</sup> The arts are often characterized as 'spiritually uplifting', and Carey also dedicates some critical thoughts to that and to the concept of ecstasy. Most of us are convinced that ecstasy is a state of blessing and is good for us and good for the people. However, Carey points out, what football hooligans experience when they tear apart a stadium is also ecstasy, when people lynch one another is also ecstasy. Ecstasy is therefore not necessarily good for the people, at least not in the sense of moral good. We could argue that the ecstasy generated by art is different, but, when referring to the survey of Margaret Laski, Carey points out that people with a high ability to have aesthetic experience have a (much) higher rate of being selfish, self-obsessed and ignorant (2005:124,125).

<sup>20</sup> With this statement Carey touches upon what is going to be elaborated further in the concept of the transitional space of art.

decision-making about our future, there is a need to look into various contemporary art theories that expect a similar, interrogatory, anti-hegemonic force from contemporary art.

Having looked into their ideas, I will outline where I think the force of contemporary art we should listen to might lie.

### Contemporary art for deconstructing hegemony

Several art theorists argue that the role art should play in today's society is political. In this sense, artistic practices should take on the conscious role of questioning and interrogating the current state of affairs orchestrated by hegemony. Although the practices should remain artistic and not simply politically active, theorists see the role of art as radical interference. One of the most distinctive voices in this field is the social critic and philosopher, Chantal Mouffe, who sees art's central role in (socio-political) criticism as questioning the set values of hegemony. In order to argue for the critical role of art, in her book *Agonistics. Thinking the world politically* (2013) Mouffe introduces the term 'agonistic art' which she sees as a possible agent for 'agonistic democracy'. It seems that, although Mouffe calls for the overthrow of hegemony, she still keeps the arts within an instrumentalist framework, namely in use for agonistic democracy. Nonetheless, in the ensuing paragraphs, I will introduce her ideas in order to see how she sees the role of art as an agent that can invite us out of hegemony, and how her take on the matter corresponds with my idea of art as non-teleological space beyond hegemony.

The key term 'agonistics', in Mouffe's approach, is in itself aggressive terminology and indeed, Mouffe is not about peace, reconciliation or coming to agreements. It is not how she sees the potentials of either democracy or of contemporary art. Mouffe argues that consensus can only be the result of exclusion which she dismisses as anti-democratic in itself. Why is that? Consensus in most cases involves compromises. With good arguments and a sufficient amount of pressure, compromises can be induced on the weak or the underprivileged. For Mouffe, in order to coexist and live well, consensus is not compulsory; the parties do not necessarily have to agree. Furthermore, tension can result in the birth of unexpected constellations. 'Agonistics' therefore stands for a strategy which involves struggle and controversies, and the possibility, or even the celebration of not being able to

come to an agreement. It is through this attitude that contemporary art can act upon society, namely by questioning the hegemonic structure that binds society in order to establish agonistic democracy. Mouffe holds very strong views about agonistics and puts a considerable responsibility on art: "The agonistic approach sees critical art as constituted by a manifold of artistic practices bringing to the fore the existence of alternatives to the current post-political order. Its critical dimension consists in making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (2013:77).

In other words, Mouffe expects art to shed light on the power-structure that binds society, as well as on the subjects and practices excluded and 'otherized' by hegemonic operations.<sup>21</sup> Although Mouffe is quite pessimistic when exploring whether art has the necessary space and potentials to question, interrogate and make a difference, she argues that the 'struggle' should continue anyway and "we should visualize forms of artistic resistance as agonistic interventions within the context of counter-hegemonic struggles" (2013:72). Put differently, Mouffe claims that art should be openly politically critical, counter-hegemonic forums should be established and art should play an active role in questioning and interrogating with the open intention of making a difference. In other words, good art should operate with an open political goal in mind: it should be teleological.

Mouffe's approach to contemporary art as radical, oppositional, counter-hegemonic interrogation and statement is very popular these days. Many art institutions practice political criticism and they manage to overcome the dictating power-structure they were initially part of. For instance, the Kyiv Biennale in Ukraine recently announced the cancellation of the 2015 event not only because of the physical dangers of political unrest and the problems of displaying and exhibiting works in a potentially politically dangerous

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<sup>21</sup> Although Mouffe sounds very radical and active, she has doubts if art can still obtain a platform to act as a critical agent. Can (self-)reflective experience still have a role in capitalism, driven by production? Is there a chance to think out of the box? Can art have enough power to step above the power-structure the entire society is embedded in? As she puts it: "Art has been subsumed by the aesthetics of biopolitical capitalism, and autonomous production is no longer possible. ... We have all been transformed into passive functions of the capitalist system" (2013:72). Can art as a radical practice be heard at all in a society where even the institutions, namely sites of critical culture that are supposed to reflect upon the world we live in, are embedded in hegemony? Mouffe argues that even museums, supposedly sites of progressive criticism, are paralyzed by capitalism: "The main objective of these 'postmodern' museums is to make money through blockbuster exhibitions and the sale of a manifold of products for tourists. The type of 'participation' they promote is based on consumerism, and they actively contribute to the commercialization and depoliticization of the cultural field" (2013:83).

zone, but also because the organizers felt that “In the times when our society faces serious force majeure and directs all possible efforts to overcome the tragic consequences of this situation, it is not appropriate for us to proceed with organizing the multi-million dollar project” (<http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2015/03/kyiv-art-biennale-cancelled-due-to-political-instability/>).

In this case, the cancellation of the event stands for social sympathy and, as such, is a political statement. In Europe, many art professionals feel that political statements are expected from contemporary art. For instance, take a look at the mission statement of the OFF-Biennale Budapest<sup>22</sup> which is a contemporary art event that is expressly organized to exclude governmental organizations as well as government funding. They openly claim that “art is political!” It is a (relatively) massive project, at least for a country the size of Hungary, involving about two hundred artists and eight cities apart from Budapest, with strong international and regional cooperation. The initiative was created to show what contemporary art might represent when it is not dictated and driven by the current Hungarian state regime that has taken over the major art institutions and to some extent enforces art to collude with the vision of the government. For Mouffe, as well as for many of the OFF-Biennale participants, art and politics are intertwined. The crucial question for Mouffe is the “possible forms of critical art” and she is interested in “... examining the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony” (2013:76).

How does Mouffe see effective political art? Mouffe presents the example of Alfredo Jaar’s 2008 Milan project entitled *Questions, questions*<sup>23</sup> that was an open political statement against the Berlusconi government. The work consisted of texts such as ‘Do politics need culture?’ or ‘Is the intellectual useless?’ displayed in public spaces, including public transportation, billboards and elsewhere. This was a project that called for intellectual work and critical thinking against a given political regime. Mouffe argues that Jaar’s intention was to “‘try to create little cracks in the system’ by occupying any space available for three months so as to create a network of resistance and to restore the meaning of the public space, which had been erased by the control of Berlusconi” (2013:79).

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<sup>22</sup> For further information visit: <http://offbiennale.hu/what-is-off/>.  
<sup>23</sup> [http://www.alfredojaar.net/milano\\_questions.questions/](http://www.alfredojaar.net/milano_questions.questions/).



I can imagine that there were people (especially the already critically thinking elite) who 'got the message' and were (re)assured, in their existing framework, that the Berlusconi-government was imposing practices that curtailed democracy. Practices such as Jaar's, aim to impose those desired 'cracks' in order to create space for "building a counter-environment" and to introduce, through "aesthetic means", "new forms of identification" (2013:80).<sup>24</sup>

What really makes me wonder regarding Mouffe's suggestions, is whether practices as such are powerful and all-encompassing enough firstly to unsettle hegemony and, secondly, to create an alternative that comes about non-teleologically. Mouffe sees these practices as examples of agonistic art activism, and a form of agonistic democracy. Yet I would argue that all these works reflect and stay on a socio-political level, and remain a commentary on hegemony, therefore keeping within the confines of the power-structure they aim to overcome. As I see it, the problem with this work is that it makes sense only within and in relation to hegemony: in this case, the Berlusconi-government. In a way, such works remain parasitic on the very order they aim to criticize, and rarely inspire a revision of universal issues such as 'oppression' or 'corruption' in general that, to me, would be the purpose of good art. Furthermore, such projects rarely inspire personal work. They address the collective, but they do not address the personal, biographical, or psychological. In this sense, although I called Mouffe 'radical', she is after all not radical enough, as those 'cracks' might emerge on a social and collective level, but they might not be powerful enough to work on a personal realm for us to reconsider to what extent we, personally, are effected and manipulated by the matters targeted. So what Mouffe has in mind in terms of counter-hegemony revealed by art, is not what I have in mind, as for her the artistic practices remain on the level of socio-criticism and interrogation of a specific situation. Such artworks do not seem to be reaching for universal reconsideration of, let us say, hegemony in general, nor are they engaged with the personal.

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<sup>24</sup> Mouffe (2013) writes that she sees in Jaar's work an oppositional, interrogative force that is not directly, narratively political, yet it is more powerful as a means for counter-hegemony. Although in terms of Jaar's work I can see what she means, as indeed, fortunately his practice is not journalistic. However, similarly to the work of many fellow artists addressing socio-political issues, the project *Questions* stay on a blunt, easy and cognitive level that to me does not appear to be powerful enough, neither politically, nor artistically.

A philosopher who also attributes a political attitude to art in terms of interrogating hegemony, and who is also closer to addressing the personal, is Jacques Rancière. In his essay 'Aesthetic separation, aesthetic community' (2011) in order to demonstrate what he means by the force of art, Rancière refers to an artists' collective called *Campement urbain* who camp in the much troubled and currently dangerous outskirts of Paris, the notorious *banlieux*. The artists' aim is to reverse the discourse that, due to the mass individualism advocated by capitalist productionism, sees the crisis of the outskirts as the lack of social ties. These suburbs are overpopulated and cramped, almost without personal private space. This claustrophobic existence does not result in the making of a strong community, but rather in frustration. In their project *I and Us* (2005-present) participants (the residents of the outskirts) work on creating a space in which one individual can exist solitarily in a "completely unnecessary, fragile and useless space". The claiming of this empty space forms a community of those who are, on the one hand, able to be alone and be just themselves individually ('I'), but also who shape a community of 'Us' in which every member is entitled to having the experience of spending time being alone. Those participating *individuals* in the project came together as a *community* and were even willing to wear T-shirts with mottos that stood for the experience they gained from the project. A hijab-wearing female participant (fig. 2.), for instance, was wearing a T-shirt onto which she had written: "I want an empty word that I could fill" (2011:45-54).<sup>25</sup>

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This longing for an empty space in which creativity – individual creativity - can emerge is also crucial for Guy Debord who gave special importance to time spent outside the world of production. These are the times of not doing anything, sitting in bars, going for pointless strolls, trotting down the street with no purpose in mind. This space is also that of creativity, as I learnt from artists who can lie on the couch for hours watching the ceiling and seemingly doing nothing.



Fig. 2. *Campement urbain, I and us* (2005-)

In a sense, the 'body' that is recreated here outside the hegemonic structure is the body of much needed solitude, in other words, individual and collective empty space. In my interpretation, although Rancière acknowledges political relevance, he is actually more interested in the potential of creating some kind of 'ground zero' without teleological implications. He celebrates such projects because they take place on a personal level and the individuals come together as collective space from which organically, non-teleologically, new alternatives might emerge. For Rancière, critical art reconsiders subject-object relations and does so beyond representation, reason or words, addressing the individual and calling for deep, personal reconsideration: in the case of *Campement urbain*, for an empty, silent space of retreat. This necessarily might have political consequences on the level of the community, but the departure point is the personal experience.

This 'space of emptiness', Rancière claims, emerges in connection with the idea of going beyond hegemony. It appears that real counter-hegemony cannot spring from negative identification (e.g. I define myself in the light of the other). Real and effective counter-hegemony might surface from thinking/being in the world completely in parameters other than hegemony. This most important idea, as I see it, is present in Rancière's take but less so in Mouffe's argument on art.

It has been suggested that one of this 'other than hegemonic' phenomena is non-teleological space. This is what the force of art can generate; although Rancière touches

upon it, it needs further substantiation. In order to demonstrate how I perceive this force of art, a force that might lead to (but at the same time be inseparable from) those most important spaces of 'ground zero', I will present Krzysztof Ziarek's take on the subject.

### **1.5 Art as an alternative space**

In the book entitled *The force of art* (2004), Ziarek diagnoses the powerlessness of art in a techno-centric world driven by business and economic interests. This "'powerlessness,' in the context of art, suggests that artworks, when compared with social, political, or even physical forces, lack any effectiveness in changing reality" (2004:3). Indeed, if art was to prove its use for the development of society according to the parameters of science or technology, it would fall short. As demonstrated previously in the discussion on the 'benefit of art', if put into an instrumentalist position, the arts are always made to fight for their own legitimacy.

Furthermore, according to Ziarek, we do not need art for the sake of creating happier, wealthier, healthier individuals. In other words, its mere nature should not be defined within the parameters of the use-benefit-goal mindset that characterizes our current society. Instead, Ziarek considers that the force of art is about counter-hegemony, although not in the sense Mouffe advocates critical attitude. Ziarek uses the term 'force', rejecting the term 'power', to connote what art can do, and how. Ziarek believes expressly in the 'force' of art, and not in the 'power' of art. The reason for this distinction, he explains, is that 'power' is usually identified with the power structure that defines our world and aims for growth, wealth and development, whereas, in the case of art, its 'power-less-ness' is understood "not as a negative judgment ... but as a provocative indication that art functions *otherwise* than through dominant articulations of power (2004:3, italics, DV).

It cannot be overemphasized that, as Ziarek states, this attitude towards art, excludes the expectation that art should act within the same frame of references we attribute to practices that are there to evoke some kind of change in society. Art should not be thought of in utilitarian terms, which is why he rejects the instrumentalist attitude. Along with that, he also rejects the role of art in the service of any political goal, even if the goal is to question hegemony. In this case, art still positions itself in terms of hegemony, therefore

cannot rise above or go beyond it. To Ziarek, the force of art is to act *otherwise*, in other words, outside, 'other than' the power-structure. When it comes to art and powerlessness as a proposition for an "alternative economy of forces", art is to function in a way that is *unlike* the operation of the power structure we are embedded in. Therefore, Ziarek articulates that the force of art lies in its "ability to let go of power, to transform relations and enable their alternative configurations" (2004:3, 4).

How should one imagine the nature of the force of art? If art is not power than what kind of force is it? By the force of art, Ziarek understands the *transformative* character of art (2004:5). He uses the term 'force' to underline the transformative nature of art in the tradition of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, and he describes a "level of nonformalized functions and flows of energy, that is, in terms of the elemental constituents of 'being' prior to their actualization into substances, objects or bodies" (2004:7). This is perfectly in line with how I see the force of art, namely as a site of 'ground zero', an energy that does not strive for a particular goal.

The nature of this force is explained through Heidegger's ideas: "... force is seen in the Heideggerian perspective as *rupture*, change, transformation, that is, as the very dynamic of being and unfolding" (Ziarek 2004:7). Unfolding, dynamism of being and rupture are key concepts for what I think of the force of art.<sup>26</sup> I would like to highlight the 'dynamism' element in art as Ziarek feels that, and I could not agree more, instead of understanding the artwork as an object, it should be understood as an event, or as 'work'. In this sense, the materiality of the artwork is secondary; its impact on the subject becomes its primary goal (2004:9).

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<sup>26</sup> Although their ideas differ on many points, Ziarek is just as critical of the objectification and commodification of art as Mouffe appears to show in her *Agonistics* (2013). He writes: "The notion of contemporary art as forcework highlights the dynamic, transformative momentum of art's work over and against the notion of artworks as objects and/or commodities" (2004:7). Ziarek therefore understands under the term 'art' as a force-field in which the commodity status of, and even the 'objecthood' of the artwork is secondary, and art, seen as action, as a non-teleological force, can exercise particular transformative effects on the observer.

Ziarek does not simply argue that, even if it is an object, art should be understood as other than an object or commodity, but also sees great danger in treating art as commodity. He writes: "To understand the work of art as an aesthetic and cultural object, subject to the laws of aesthetics, cultural transmission, and commodification, is to effectively foreclose art within the operations of making and power and this to sap and annul the very force of art, that is, forcework understood as the transformative redistribution of relations otherwise than in terms of power" (2004:107). This is important to consider, as if his theory were to be listened to by practitioners, it would lead to a very different positioning of the arts that currently revolves around the art market which treats art as a luxury item.

If art works upon us, and if it has the force to change and transform, one wonders how it does so and what exactly it is that changes. If the work of art cannot effectively exercise practical change on the world that we live in, what can it change, where does its force lie? As Ziarek puts it: "...the artistic forcework can be seen as an enabling, transformative work, which radically *changes the very momentum of relations*" (2004:11, italics, DV). The reason why this force field is so important to recognize is because, through changing how we relate to the world, it is capable of taking us beyond constitutions of power. As I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, it manages to overcome the power-structure we are embedded in and which we cannot see or think our way out of.

How does this tie into how Mouffe and Rancière see the force of art? Unlike Mouffe, Ziarek does not think of this move as political, in the sense of referring to a political statement, nor does he expect artworks to target specific elements of the power-structure he would like to see overthrown by the force of art. Along with Rancière, he believes that by making the viewer *personally* exist within this space of 'otherwise', there is an engagement with thoughts, ideas or behavior that is 'other than' the formulas we are taught to engage with. This 'otherwise' becomes the real alternative, a force that does not aim to make itself understood by, and in terms of, power-relations. Therefore – and this is why this theory is more radical than Mouffe's - "...art's force is not an alternative power but an alternative *to power...*" (2004:12, italics, DV). In other words, art is not counter-hegemony or 'counter-environment' as it cannot be explained in terms of hegemony since even the negative identification (counter-hegemony) would not make sense.

What Ziarek is pointing out here is that art may be such a strong critique on hegemony that it does not even play according to the rules of hegemony, but offers a way of being in the world that hegemony cannot understand or comment on. Art might still reference social issues and problems, and in its subject-matter it might be socially critical, but that is not where its force lies. Art as force is no longer in the service of power and should not be understood from the viewpoint of power. Therefore, art's force becomes political in the sense that it is an alternative to politics. It can become so as "it instantiates the event as free from the most fundamental and pervasive kind of domination: the originary mobilization and shaping of force relations for the sake of power" (2004:14).

As stated previously, the force of art therefore operates outside the power of the social bond and this is what makes it really political. The question that calls for an answer next is just what kind of a force is Ziarek talking about? How can this force be grasped?

In order to elaborate on these different modes of operation, Ziarek (2004:16) reaches back to Heidegger and argues that the 'work' of art is to be understood as *poiesis* rather than a working towards something, for a particular goal to be achieved. If such a goal is in mind, the artwork becomes a teleological mission and loses the very thing it was created for, namely the nature of its free force-field. Ziarek's mission is therefore "to figure force otherwise than technologically"; this he attributes to art and borrows Heidegger's term of the poietic, while contrasting technic with poietic. He explains the poietic force as follows:

... art becomes socially 'meaningful' precisely when it breaks with the aesthetic and political functions that society establishes for it, when it alters the power formations that regulate society and that society wants to stamp or project onto artworks. Instead, what art inaugurates is a different forcework, a different disposition of forces, which means that the forces that operate in society in a technological or instrumental, overrationalized manner... become nontechnological. They are the same forces, yet their modality of unfolding is different in art, which means that the relations they produce become disposed into a different mode of revealing, and, as a result, the world unfolds differently (2004:41).

Poietic and technic spring from the same root, but they are qualitatively different forces. For poietic, this "different" unfolding is what Ziarek refers to with the term "otherwise" that he treats as analogous with "aphesis", in other words a "letting be" (elaborated upon in Chapter Three). For Heidegger, as Ziarek explains, in *poiesis* it is "enabling" that takes place, that is "nothing practical, nor an effect or a result; it does not produce a thing, an entity, or a being but simply enables what *is* to be *as* it is. ... this enabling is not passive or contemplative but instead participatory and transformative" (2004:141).

This is how Ziarek understands the force of art: as *poiesis*, as an enabling, as a real alternative to power that does not speak the same language as power. It is not goal oriented, not defined by production, rather this force allows the 'things of the world' to emerge without prescription. Through *poiesis*, as opposed to technology, another face of

relations manifest and a different perspective is possible. The subject-matter, the message (of the artwork) might or might not refer to actual events of the world, this is not the point. Instead, the force of *poiesis* takes one out of the technological mindset and it is this existence in 'otherwise', that is other than power-bound and technological, where a radically new take on the world might emerge. This shift from technic to poietic needs a more elaborate explanation.

### From technic to *poietic*

In order to demonstrate how the force of art might be able to shift us from technological to poietic, I refer to an art project where the overthrowing of the technological mindset is especially tangible. The following example is important because it also reflects upon (and shows an alternative to) the dilemma that characterizes current scientific and philosophical discourse: slow versus fast (science) and the need for a space to consider the consequences of our actions.

Philosopher Robert Zwijnenberg (2012) demonstrates what might take place when a scientific experiment originally set in the fast science realm, in this case genetic manipulation to increase production, is turned into an art project. As transgenic aesthetic research at n The Arts and Genomics Centre in Holland, bioartist, Adam Zaretsky, carried out an experiment of genetically modifying pheasant embryos to grow two heads or four legs. He and the students would inject plasmid DNA into the egg in order to generate mutation. Having done the intervention, the fate of the embryos had to be decided. According to Dutch law, such mutants cannot be born (meaning the eggs could not be allowed to hatch) so the embryos had to be killed before hatching. The reactions of the students were striking as they varied from not wanting to follow the law to crying and mourning the unborn embryos. Zwijnenberg remarks on the project:

This hands-on tampering with life, however basic, by the students themselves *set within this artistic performance, alienating them from everyday student life, gave them a deep, new experience and understanding of issues raised by the life sciences*. In this embryology lab a lot of questions, anger, confusion, ambiguity and misunderstandings emerged from all sides (Zwijnenberg 2012 italics, DV).



This experiment exposed the consequences of genetic manipulation in a completely different light. For art, Zwijnenberg (2012) argues

... the materials, tools, and technologies of the life sciences are hardly neutral... They are rife with all sorts of cultural, political, social, and ethical assumptions and implications that are part of this particular scientific practice. ... The use of these materials, tools, and technologies within an artistic context automatically means that artists have to deal with these promises, expectations, and fears, including their cultural, political, social, and ethical ramifications.

In other words, artists have a holistic view of the complex connotations of a scientific experiment, in which, from the beginning, layers of meaning play a key role in the experiment and the subsequent experience. Due to showcasing the experiment in an artistic framework, this 'other than instrumental' understanding could give rise to a completely different take on the consequences of our actions. As Zwijnenberg remarks:

Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, I see this performance by Zaretsky as a wonderful example of creating a platform on which scientists, artists and scholars can work together on important issues associated with the notion of tampering with life. The artwork is neither the objects or eggs nor the processes and activities, *the artwork is the open space created with these objects, processes and activities in which something can happen, in which insights can arise that have not been predetermined, but are unexpected, surprising, threatening or unpleasant* (Zwijnenberg 2012, italics, DV).

What takes place during the experiment generates a different attitude, a different behavior towards the scientific process. Through a poietic strategy, in which the embryos are not treated as a means towards a specific end, but are looked upon as potential life in themselves, the outcome as well as the entire experience of the project may result in different decision-making.

The key point for this particular experiment is the phenomenon of 'open space' that resonates 'ground zero', a space without teleological implications for coming up with a change in decision-making processes. If the complexity and manifold meaning of such

experiments are acknowledged, it could lead us to a different understanding of science (an alternative to fast science) and also to a different political attitude. Nonetheless, I would not list this experiment under ‘ground zero’ in art, although it is getting very close. It is a strong, but, like Mouffe’s take, still ‘parasitical’ commentary on science and its possible impact on society. Therefore, the project still remains within, and comments on, a hegemonic framework. For Ziarek, this case, as explained in detail, is different, as he sees the force of art as a completely distinctive alternative, one that does not even speak the language of the social framework.

The artistic practices I am looking for are sites of ground zero that might or might not carry a socio-political message, might or might not have a reference to the problems and issues our society currently face. The point is not their direct reference to specific issues. Rather, these artistic practices seem to carry the force of *poiesis*, in other words, they can rise above or beyond, without corresponding with the rules of the hegemonic (technocratic) system. Therefore, as Ziarek also explained, these practices operate with a different logic. The kind of art that seems to be relevant for the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century enables us to exist in spaces that are not teleologically defined, not prescriptive; instead they interrogate those frames of reference and taken for granted structures we, as society, live by.

Therefore, the practices I am referring to throughout the research do not mirror, but question and shape the reality we live. These practices are not instrumental in the sense that they do not aim to heal or fix what has been broken. Instead, these practices tear apart, they invite us to, figuratively speaking, fall apart in front of them; they are artworks that do not tell us how to put the picture back together. These practices therefore do not dictate any meta-narrative, but they are empty spaces with potential. This space is about confrontation, contradiction and confusion of the outer and inner self, both with our conscious and unconscious, carefully built Symbolic reality (elaborated in Ch.4).

One might be tempted to ask why look for such a space in art and not somewhere else? The reason why we need art, apart from other ‘platforms’ like slow science or New Materialism, might lie in the phenomenon that art is not simply cognitive. As Zwijnenberg argues (2012) “in the field of possibilities opened up by the artistic register – including inconsistencies, paradoxes, ambiguities, uncertainties – an artist can try out different and sometimes opposing avenues of understanding without being troubled by or getting stuck in linguistic paradoxes and dualisms”.

Art, as an *experience*, can rise above the workings of the ego that is bound by dualistic apperception of the world. As it is not simply a cognitive act, it is not about bringing into being another set of possible theories that shape the world. It is not even about dialogues that might or might not lead somewhere. Art is a *physical, a bodily experience*, that acts in a different realm from philosophy or social sciences, even if they operate with the strategies of 'slow'. Although theory might help lay down foundations, changes usually take place when there is a going beyond cognition and there is a physical and emotional manifestation of the theory. As I see it, this is where art can join in with 'alternative ways' of grasping and shaping the world, namely with the *embodiment of the personal experience* that rises above discourse. In the space of ground zero, it does not make sense to talk theory after a while, as it is poetry that takes place, a free-associative, disorderly engagement with our existence in the 'otherwise'.

Juxtaposed by examples, my aim throughout the book is to argue that the contemporary art we should adhere to is not a mirroring, but rather a shaping of the things of the world through the participation of the observer. Some contemporary art has a specific liberty with which it can open up a space that is not created with a given predefined goal in mind. I refer to this as the 'transitional space of art' in which 'ground zero' is a foundation: a non-teleological realm in which 'being' can manifest itself without predefined structure and expectations. The reason why we need art, I argue, is that certain contemporary artworks have a potential very few cultural practices have: namely that they are able to create space in which we are able, with our entire being: conscious, unconscious, emotive, instinctual etc., to go beyond ego-boundaries.

The next chapters will attempt to clarify the following points: firstly, although much has already been said on the force of art, there is still a need for understanding *how* it is possible for a painting, for instance, to take one into any inner space. Secondly, if art can take the viewer into any space, how is it possible that such a significant space, termed 'ground zero', can reveal itself? Thirdly, if art is able to generate experiences of 'ground zero', just what kind of space is it and in what way might it be special? These questions are the focus of the following chapters. The next chapter entitled *Beyond representation* is a quest to address how an artwork can take one beyond the dualism of representation-represented and – once surpassed – how it operates.

## Chapter 2 - Beyond representation

The aim of this research is to explore where precisely the force of contemporary art relevant for the pressing times of the 21<sup>st</sup> century might lie. As it has been suggested, certain contemporary art practices might be able to create a situation in which we find ourselves in a free, non-teleological space that is an alternative for the hegemonic structures that define the world of production; a different kind of attitude in order to imagine the world 'otherwise'.

In Chapter One this space was associated with the term 'ground zero'. It was argued that these spaces might have a potential for reevaluating how we make decisions regarding our future. This kind of free space can emerge through various practices and it is hypothesized that contemporary art might be one of these platforms. The question that now needs to be answered is how to get to this state of empty, non-teleological space through art? How is it possible for any art to create such a distinctive state of consciousness? Is it not asking too much of art?

In the previous chapter the various aspects of the force of art were demonstrated. In this chapter, I take a step back, and explore if and how an art object that seemingly is not more than a portrait of something or somebody might be capable of inviting the beholder into a realm that could have further potential for how we grasp the world 'otherwise'.

### 2.1 Outline

What needs to be explored first is how it is possible for contemporary art to take us into any space at all. The assumption that an artwork is able to take the viewer anywhere calls for two approaches: one is the representationalist approach, assuming that there is a 'depth beyond the surface' and that deeper, other than artistic meaning can be reached through decoding surface messages. The other approach suggests that the artwork is an entity in itself, and therefore a distinctive phenomenon from what it represents. In the latter case one can argue that the artwork is 'other than' representation, it points *beyond* representation and what it seems to mirror. Let me explain this distinction.

How can one grasp this 'going beyond'? Is it ever possible to let go of representation? My suggestion is "yes it is". Let me present an example. The inside of the small church on the top of Mount Pantocrator on the island of Korfu, Greece, which dates back to the sixteen-hundreds, is covered with silver plates and paintings in the Greek Orthodox style. Given that the impact of Baroque did not reach that far, the iconic simplicity of the figures reveals the Byzantine influence. To me, someone who was not raised in the tradition of religious Christianity, generally icons are icons, namely figures portraying saints and angelic figures and no more than that, in other words they are representations that are beautiful, pleasant to the eye, interesting stylistically and so on. However, when spending time at that church, looking at the ceiling and the murals around me, I had a different experience: the figures all of a sudden started to disappear. In a sense, it became irrelevant whether I was seeing Mary, John or angels on the walls, what started to glow through the figures was some kind of saintly energy. This energy was not contained in the figures, but somehow it *was* the figures themselves.

How is this possible? This experience made me wonder how a painting, drawing or any other media can point beyond what it represents. In order to explore how an artwork is able to draw us into a space in which it inspires us to imagine the world differently, we need to examine these two approaches, namely representationalism and 'the beyond'.

I start with the argument that when we approach images, we want to find out what they 'mean'. As a corner stone of this argument that is not general, however widely adopted, there is the assumption that images stand as *mimesis* of a reality; they are seen as representations of things outside themselves. In these cases, various art historical theories can be applied to specific artworks in order to reveal the set of meaning embedded in the image. It is assumed that the image can be somehow grasped through these theories and one can thus come to understand the image. The classical method applied in this case is the Panofsky-based model of a three strata reception of an image: perception, iconography and iconology. As Holly, - while contesting this approach – points out, when thinking of art as representation what the art historian looks for in the image are "its allure, its formal structure, its iconographic program, its resonance with similar artifacts" (1996:69). In order to see if/how images can be comprehended through this analytical attitude, she explores a Raphael painting.

Further on in the chapter, Holly demonstrates how and why this analytical

approach falls short. Some art theorists such as David Freedberg, WJT Mitchell, Didi-Huberman, Alfred Gell from anthropology or Martin Heidegger from philosophy suggest that this interpretive attitude freezes the image as historical evidence in the service of representation. Instead of treating the artwork as passive evidence of history, they suggest treating images as 'agents', in other words as entities in themselves, revealing what it is that they want and what they require from us. A shift from the theory of representation to that of agency is therefore introduced.

Furthermore, it is argued that whereas in the case of certain images representationalism might seem to be satisfactory in order to grasp the image, in the case of some contemporary artworks this attitude leaves the beholder empty-handed. Moreover - as demonstrated through specific artworks - the limitation of this analytical approach emerges not because we, practicing art historians, realize that we cannot look at artworks as carriers of steady meaning frozen in time, but because the artworks themselves invite us beyond representation. I argue that some artworks cannot be understood in ways other than agency. Finally, the question that needs to be answered is what specific agency might those artworks that have relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century exercise? In other words, what is needed, what kind of agency is necessary to point the beholder to imagine the world 'otherwise'?

## **2.2 Representation**

The common approach with which art historians – or interested observers in general – relate to art in the European tradition is through a representationalist attitude. They relate to the image with the assumption that it is an embodiment of things of the world 'out there', therefore they look at the image as some form of text that can be interpreted and within which meaning can be found. Holly (1996:69), points out that this approach towards images is not only practiced generally by art enthusiasts but it has been the case in many schools of art history as well; there is the image that is observed, described, defined stylistically, identified within a specific socio-cultural context, and a comparative analysis is provided with other artworks and artifacts. Questions and answers are raised in relation to the theme represented, the artist, the style and so on. This approach is in line with the

Panofsky-model used by people schooled in modernist European settings with which to approach artworks. Although it is not a given that this is how art should be looked at, this approach is the most widely recognized in our rationalism-based European world-view. The Panofsky-model suggests that there is 'meaning' in the image that can be revealed. This meaning is not only steady and definite, it is also 'larger' than the artwork itself, suggesting aspects of culture and civilization we know or can learn about. In the subsequent paragraphs I will demonstrate how representational art history treats well-known works of Old Masters such as the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506) (fig.3.) by the high Renaissance painter, Raphael.



Fig. 3. Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506)

Art history from a representationalist viewpoint treats artworks as a means to picture and deliver meaning that comes from 'outside' the artwork, and is representative of the given socio-cultural era, style of making art, the artist's persona and so on. The artwork in this sense becomes a presentation of the value-system of the epoch it was made in. When following the Panofsky-model, the first thing is to detect what is actually seen, then begins

an excavation for meaning through iconography, an exact description of the perceived experience, and iconology, a matching of the image with the cultural data available. Thus the art historian moves between what is seen and other biographical and cultural data, and connects this knowledge with what is presented in the picture. There is a lot to be learnt from such an investigation, and the art historian works as a detective, slowly revealing the times that are hidden and encoded in the artwork. Let us look at the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* by Raphael as an example.

In analysis as such, the starting point is always representation – what is seen – and immediately iconography and iconology follow. What is seen here? The three figures appear in a vast landscape beneath a cloudy sky. Iconography follows: Mary, John and Jesus forming a triangular composition are identified in an idealized landscape. Then iconology steps in and it is argued that the artwork is from Raphael's Florentine period during which he had become known as the painter of beautiful Madonnas (Gombrich 2005:34-35). This trio defines most art historical analysis. For instance, an iconological claim would be art historian, Robert Huerta's, observation (2005:31) that the pictorial composition of the *Madonna* is evidence of Raphael's interest in classical art, especially the Greek antiquities, as the pyramidal composition Raphael uses is an essential element in classical art. Another iconological finding by art historian, Ernst H. Gombrich, relying on perception and iconography, states that although the connections between the figures look spontaneous, the importance of structured design (*disegno*) is visible. From him we learn that Raphael was a careful designer of his compositions and, by using other drawings as comparative evidence, Gombrich (2005:34-35) demonstrates how Raphael spent quite some time designing idealized compositions, such as the *Madonna*, before deciding on which version of his drawing to use in the painting.

In order to complete the iconological picture, art historians also often comment on how beauty is treated in the works of Raphael. By relying on letters written by the artist, one also learns that, indeed, when creating his famous *Madonna* paintings Raphael moved away from the use of live models and came up with a concept of beauty that was independent from the good looks of any particular model, thus painting his divine-looking figures by relying on the Platonic Form of the idea of Beauty itself (Gombrich 2005: 316-322).

This portrayal of ideal beauty is in line with the Neo-Platonist principles of the times as "Raphael's art represents an attempt to achieve, in visual form, the Neo-Platonist



ideal of enlightened individuals living in a rational, ordered world. ... he tried to fuse classical ideals with Christian philosophy to bridge the gap between earthly and divine...” (Huerta 2005:31).

This striving for a perfect utopian state of being in the world in which the human being is central, is juxtaposed by the use of symbols in painting. In the Renaissance, symbolism was of crucial importance and, in order to broaden the iconological picture, art historical analysis often seeks out the symbols hidden in the picture in order to be able to decode the specific meaning and references of the work. The goldfinch, for instance, with its colorful feathers was a popular caged bird in Renaissance times, but most importantly it carried religious significance as “its red face is said to be caused by a drop of Jesus' blood: during the Way of the Cross, a goldfinch pulled a thorn from Jesus' forehead and a drop of blood fell on its head” (<http://www.artbible.info/art/large/874.html>).

The scene is therefore a reference to the awaiting crucifixion, which is why it is more than just a playful act between children. Additionally, the placing the Madonna in nature, on a rock or on the ground adheres to the theme of the ‘Madonna of humility’ referring to the virtue that was much valued by Franciscan piety. The word humility originates from the Latin *humus*, meaning ‘ground’ and was a popular subject-matter throughout the Renaissance. When investigating the image, further symbols can be found in the painting, such as daisies representing innocence, violets as references to humility, John with a bowl attached to his waist as an anticipation of the future events of baptism (Niyazi 2013).

Many volumes have been written on the art of Raphael, and books and studies are still being published today.<sup>1</sup> Their comparative approach, in-depth analysis and the showing of the artist as an exemplary figure of his times in the light of other artworks and artists is a journey back into history and a revelation of what until then were unknown segments of culture. However, the question that arises is whether one needs all this information in order to let the artwork ‘work’ on us, 21<sup>st</sup> century observers. Today, the contemporary viewer, , without knowing much about Renaissance symbolism, the message of violets, daisies, the

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<sup>1</sup> Notable authors are James H. Beck, Pierluigi de Vecchi or Carlo Pedretti among others and the book *The Cambridge companion to Raphael* edited by Marcia B Hall (2005) contains contemporary insights on the oeuvre of the artist.

color codes or even what the goldfinch stands for, may still be captivated by its stillness and peace. It is as if time had stopped and we are taken back into another world away from our noisy reality, tormented by inner (and outer) turmoil. Let me juxtapose this argument with an example and continue the investigation of the realm beyond representation.



Fig. 4. Lucian Freud, *Sunny morning with eight legs* (1997)



Fig. 5. Raphael, *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505)

I shall never forget how I happened to accidentally spot a similar work by Raphael also painted in his Florentine period: the *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505) (fig.5.) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. I had gone to see a Lucian Freud retrospective in the same museum, and the last exhibition room opened into the museum's permanent Renaissance collection. The dynamic, tense, anxious and tormented figures of Freud, full of neurosis, narcissism and the tragedy of the human condition fascinated me with their force and despair (fig. 4.). Having gone through that, catching sight of the *Madonna* in the other room came as a shock. It was like being dragged into another world, one of calm, peace, order, stillness and divinity.

The force of the image simply stunned me. What matters from the point of view of this research is that I did not know much about Raphael's *oeuvre*; I was not armed with the art historical knowledge that would have helped the engagement. Knowing the facts and theory in connection with an image can undoubtedly help to open up an artwork and see it in context. Yet, what that work of art from the Renaissance has to say to us, contemporary viewers, *today*, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how it 'works on' us, might not *need* a strong contextual, historical and stylistic analysis. Having left the Lucian Freud show and caught sight of the Raphael, the malady of our 21<sup>st</sup> century reality struck me. Seeing the Raphael all of a sudden, I noticed how tired I was of witnessing, and also living, the torment that is evoked by the works of Freud, and how I longed for the purity, peace and calm that emerges from the Raphael. It is possible that if I had started to look at the artwork as a piece of historical evidence, the force of this impression would have disappeared. It might even be true that this type of analysis could have distanced me from the piece, as in the very moment of contextual analysis, the artwork travels back in time becoming historical evidence, thus causing its active agency for today's world to fall away.

How can we look at art other than representation? How can we approach it if not through a stylistic, historical, iconographical analysis? If this representationalist approach – as Didi-Huberman suggests - possibly 'castrates' the force of the artwork, with what attitude can we, theorists and observers, approach art?

### 2.3 Overcoming representation

Many art theorists as well as philosophers find representationalism problematic, so let me present a brief insight into possible criticisms. Philosopher Daniel Doneson explores Martin Heidegger's take on representation (further discussed in Ch.3). Although when one reads Heidegger it might not be fully obvious, Doneson emphasizes that Heidegger goes as far as saying that the nature of the artwork is *misunderstood* in its identification with representation, so the representationalist approach actually harms the artwork. He argues that, in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, the artwork is looked upon as a fabricated thing whose task is always to refer to something other than itself. This is misleading as it diverts the attention from the *Dasein* of the artwork that, as a relational entity, exercises a special presence on the viewer. In other words, the very being of the artwork is curtailed if treated as representation (Doneson 2011).

Having read his *Confronting images*, I assume that Didi-Huberman (2005) would probably note that representationalism is the legacy that characterized art history from Vasari through Panofsky and onwards. The problem with this approach is that art is seen as allegorical in nature, meaning that it manifests something other than itself: it is seen as 'matter plus message'; the matter and form carrying the message is the essence of the artwork. In other words, as in the case of the Madonna paintings, the suprasensible appears in the sensible. This approach of representationalism leads to the conclusion that the artwork - no matter how skillfully executed - is inessential in its nature, it is not more than material conveying a message that can be interpreted, analyzed and decoded.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, art history should be written differently.

Didi-Huberman presents an other-than-interpretive take on Fra Angelico's *The Annunciation* (1440-1441) (fig.6.) in the San Marco monastery in Florence.

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Also see Doneson 2011:169-73 for detailed analysis.



Fig. 6. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation* (1440-41)

When engaging with the artwork, Didi-Huberman recognizes that an interpretive approach for decoding artwork according to cultural evidence, especially the sacred texts produced in the Renaissance, cannot work. The artwork falls short when it is forced into a representational framework, whereas it may reveal its manifold references, a multiplicity of associations and a flow of fantasies and impressions that float along one another simultaneously. When consulting the texts that shaped the vision of Fra Angelico, such as the *Artes Memorandi* or the *Summae de exemplis et similitudinibus rerum*, Didi-Huberman recognizes that these texts are far from “compilations of knowledge”. Instead, they are “rather labyrinths in which knowledge loses its way and becomes fantasy, in which the system becomes a great displacement, a great multiplication of images. Theology itself is not construed here as a knowledge such as we understand the word today, which is to say as something that we can possess. ... If there is any knowledge at all, it is not ‘caught’ or grasped by anyone...” (Didi-Huberman 2005:21).

In other words, Didi-Huberman concludes that *The Annunciation* was never made to be rationally understood. Therefore, rather than freezing an artwork into art history or discourse, he encourages us to let art *work*, by simply looking at it, or just *being* with it in “suspended attention”. In this space of contemplating (and not thinking about) the image, “self-evidence” breaks apart and those boxes into which we squeeze images in order to ‘master’ them, collapse (Didi-Huberman 2005:7).

According to Didi-Huberman, in this “suspended attention”, the ‘striking whiteness’ of the image takes precedence and the experience of being with the silence of the artwork becomes a completely different state of mind from the analytical hunt for meaning.

Holly also calls for an other-than-representationalist approach. In her book, *Past looking. Historical imagination and the rhetoric of the image* (1996) Holly follows the path of post-structuralism in the sense that she calls for images to be treated outside the domain of fixed meaning. She does this to prevent the image from being locked within a specific narrative narrowed by a given path of understanding. She starts her exploration with the attitude that images should be treated as texts with manifold meaning and various readings. Along with that, viewers should also think of themselves as texts with complex and never steady frames of references.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, what actually takes place when the two texts - the image and the observer - meet, is the emergence of a collective of various meanings in a flux resulting from the unpredictable encounter.<sup>4</sup>

Holly continues her argument with the exploration of historical images. She argues that history can never be recollected and the past can only be imagined through our own current projections. This means that there is no such thing as an objective look at the past or a decoding, mapping of objective meaning in which we treat the artwork as a timeless object and ourselves as impartial context-free observers. She claims: “Different times produce different readers who ask different questions. The swing between past object and present subjecthood is the domain in (...) which meaning is produced” (1996:26).

Holly acknowledges that not all branches of art history embrace this approach and she argues that currently – referring to the 1990s, though it still applies today - art history has two distinctive directions: “Either we dig our heels into the unfamiliar terrain and resolutely refuse to acknowledge that we have genuinely been expelled from the garden

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<sup>3</sup> I paraphrase her argumentation by using Derrida’s vocabulary. It is important to mention here that the post-structuralist understanding of a text is not the structuralist, Saussurean model in which the word is a sign that signifies the signified, in other words is able to ‘carry’ and cover a particular meaning. For the post-structuralists, meaning is always in a flux based on the fact that even the relationship of word and thing (signifier-signified) is indirect, relative and always deferred.

<sup>4</sup> It has to be noted that - true to this post-structuralist argument - Holly does not regard art as a phenomenon with ontological status. However, - and she would probably agree with this argument - one must not deny that there are certain qualities to art that are the property of art regardless of subjective apperception. It is as if one was looking at the night sky in which the stars are unquestionably there. What constellations we notice, if any, is a matter of subjective perception, but the presence of the stars is undoubtable.

where the timeless work of art reigns supreme, or we take those objects as *they appear before us* in the shimmering atmosphere of the new world and use their visible deconstruction as the occasion to remap our own disciplinary universe” (1996:5, italics, DV).

In other words, although Holly acknowledges that these two approaches exist, for her the times are gone in which the art historian could still behave as if under the spell of the artwork as a timeless entity to be studied through an objective gaze. Instead, we should look at what the artworks we explore are doing for us, today, and how they inspire us to rethink our world.

The question that follows takes this different attitude from theory to practice. “If images refuse fixity, how are we going to identify and catalogue them and, by extension, write their history and tell their pictures?” (1996:7). What Holly is asking here is how can we write about or rather ‘tell art’ if we do not treat it as some timeless object or fixed evidence of the past? She suggests the following approach: “... I want to consider the ways in which the binary opposition between subject and object can be regarded as perpetually unfixed, as historically ‘on the move’” (1996:7).

In other words, as opposed to looking at the artwork as the passive ‘other’ and the observer as active self, a different mentality should be adopted. In my reading, this mentality plays with how and in what way the two parties are empowered. Although ‘empowered’ might sound like a strong word it is the right one to use, as in the former representationalist approach there is no power given to the artwork, it is looked upon as an object of curiosity; it is like an interesting corpse waiting to be dissected. However, in the latter case, as Holly also points, “art instructs us in telling” (1996:11).

This is an important observation from the viewpoint of this research, as if ‘art can tell’, it means that it has an active agency. And indeed, subsequently she argues that “the object of art also possesses a subjecthood, in the sense of an agency distinct from the artist who made it – an agency that compels viewers to respond in certain ways” (1996:11).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of agency that Holly is referring to here, is the concept extensively explored through the ideas of the anthropologist, Alfred Gell, and it is this view, namely that art is an empowered, active agent that is the core principle of my approach. In the

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<sup>5</sup> With the word ‘agency’, Alfred Gell immediately comes to mind, and his ideas are explored later in this chapter. It has to be noted that Gell published his book on art and agency in 1998, whereas Holly’s text was published in 1996, therefore it is understandable that no reference is made to Gell.

paragraphs below I explore Gell's theory as I place the emphasis mostly on what the artwork *can do* and what it communicates to the contemporary observer and not so much on – as Holly does in her book (1996) – how the artwork is grasped by the subjective attitude of the observer. I argue that if we grant full agency to the artwork, it is able to impact us in ways that we do not necessarily foresee, expect or welcome; this encounter, as Malabou notes, is non-teleological. From here, the unexpected agency of contemporary art, the kind of agency that makes us, contemporary beholders, imagine the world differently would be just one more step.

The following sub-chapter presents theorists who treat art as agency. Although they are all distinctive voices, they call for an end to representationalism when looking at art, and instead to treating it as some kind of agency. The reason for exploring these thinkers and their ideas of art as agency is because it is my contention that art can only help to imagine the world 'otherwise' if force is given to it and it can '*make*' the observer grasp the world differently.

## 2.4 Agency

What is an artwork if it is not representation? How does the artwork overcome its own objecthood? As Doneson says when explaining the theories of Heidegger, the philosopher believes the statue of a god is not something made after the god as a representation of the god. The statue of the god is perceived as the god itself. Similarly, tragedy is not the telling of a battle, but it is taken as the battle itself. While watching the tragedy enacted in a performance, we experience the battle taking place, we feel it on our own skin. It is in this moment of engagement that the artwork works on us or as Heidegger expresses it, a "setting-into-work of truth" (Doneson 2011: 169-173).

I can identify with this approach when looking at the *Madonna of the meadow*. The artwork, through its straightforward, open intention takes the viewer by its presence, by – as Heidegger would say – its "truth", and captivates us by the force of its beauty, peace and harmony.<sup>6</sup>

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This approach is explored extensively in Chapter Three – *From presence to absence*.



The philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, points out that a picture is an ontological event. For Gadamer certain images show full ontological power, meaning that he sees a picture not as the representation of the represented, not as a signifier of the signified, but as a picture identical with the signified. In his seminal book, *The power of images: Studies in the history and theory of response* (1991) David Freedberg seems to go along Gadamer and argues that artworks indeed fully embody and manifest the power of the represented. This relationship of the signifier becoming identical with the signified is best seen in religious practices of the past and present, for instance in the case of the Yoruba customs associated with the famous brass heads found in Benin. The ceremonial heads (fig.7.) shaped in the likeness of kings and nobles were not simply representative sculptures *that looked like* the diseased king but actually *replaced* the king in his everyday life and function while the new king was being elected (Lawal 2001).



Fig. 7. Copper head from Ife (12-16<sup>th</sup> century)

In this relationship, the king (signified) is identical with the brass head (signifier). This approach seems to suggest that the signified actually comes to life via the signifier, assuming that there is a concrete object/subject that stands as signified. It is from this assumption on the relationship of representation-represented that Freedberg (1991) bases his analysis. He maintains the assumption that images 'live', and presents the role of images in indigenous cultures as well as contemporary reactions to images of authority in order to

demonstrate the complexity of the relationship towards these powerful entities. Freedberg states, for instance, that the statue of Artemis at Pellene was covered throughout most of the year and was only revealed on certain days and shown to the public during a procession. No one was allowed to look directly at the image, as it was considered to be too powerful (1991:32-36). Artemis in Sparta was also regarded as extremely dangerous and was thought to have the power to drive men mad (1991:73). In *The power of images* there are numerous recitations of images that have healing powers; they almost work like relics. Statues of Madonnas cry real tears, one Madonna painting by Altdorfer (1519) apparently had miraculous qualities that would heal the sick (1991:112). For Freedberg, the tearing down of political monuments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century comes from an urge similar to the covering of the Artemis statue; an acknowledgment that these creatures (artworks) are the signified *per se*. The statue of the political leader (Stalin, Lenin and other) does not simply represent, but is identical with the political leader; with the signified.<sup>7</sup>

Although the above mentioned examples are connected to religion and politics, I do not think we have to go this far to understand how powerful and animated images are, even for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why would no one dare to poke a pin into the eyes of the photograph of one's mother? Even tearing the photograph to pieces would seem like a brutal act. We animate images to the point that we almost identify them, in this case, with our mother.<sup>8</sup> Although Freedberg acknowledges the extreme power of images, he does not do more than diagnose the different effects and affects various artworks from different eras have on past and contemporary audiences. Furthermore, he seems to argue that all artworks fully embody the represented, be they a god, a political leader or the Virgin Mary.

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<sup>7</sup> Although we would think that this intense relationship with images characterizes pre-Enlightenment societies only, it is actually not the case. Even in today's 21<sup>st</sup> century, western culture images, for instance, are thought to help healing and to obtain desired objects. While I visited the island of Crete, I noticed votive offerings in the small Greek Orthodox church: metal plates that were carefully placed next to icons. They featured body parts such as limbs or objects such as cars, houses or a computer. It was explained to me that people put these plates next to the saints because they believe that the saints will help them obtain the desired objects or they are given as gifts for curing an illness.

<sup>8</sup> In order to show how long, historically, the debate on images has been around, it is enough to look at the Second Commandment. Straight after declaring that God and only God exists (First Commandment), there is a need to ban images, which is exactly what happens in the Second Commandment. If images did not have force, why would there be a need to prohibit them?

Another seminal theoretician, Hans Belting, has devoted several books to the power of images, especially in a religious context.<sup>9</sup> Within the context of this discussion I do not intend to elaborate upon his important arguments, let it suffice to say that Belting also raises the question as to what extent a representation is identical with the real thing. Neither Belting nor Freedberg, though, comment on the *specificity* of the effect, in other words, the *force* of different artworks arising from varying socio-cultural contexts.

In order to come up with an answer to the question ‘where do images stand’ in the likeness and similarity debate, iconologist WJ Thomas Mitchell looks at images, without distinguishing art from non-art, from the viewpoint of anthropological concepts. In his collection of essays, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images* (2005), Mitchell argues that we – just like many pre-Enlightenment societies, or communities of ‘presence-culture’<sup>10</sup> – create idols, fetishes, totems, taboos, and they, in return, regulate our lives. Mitchell evades the question this research is targeting, namely the quest for the power of contemporary images, as he argues that today’s culture does not differ in viewpoint from traditional societies or ancient civilizations that openly claimed that images are alive. Images, irrespective of history, have lives, loves, needs and desires.

Mitchell appears to treat all images as animated beings and examines the sculptures of contemporary artist, Antony Gormley, and the representations of dinosaurs from the same perspective. He seems to attribute the same type of subjectivity to art and non-artistic representation. In contrast, I argue that something radically different happens to me when I am with a Gormley sculpture than when I look at a picture of a dinosaur. What type of impact are these special entities that we call art able to make on us? What does art really do to me when it works on me? Most importantly, what is it that contemporary art is able to do?

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<sup>9</sup> To what extent is representation merely a signifier of the represented and up to what point is it identical with it? This debate is at the core of the power of images, namely is the statue of Jesus Christ the Messiah himself or is it just a replica of his image, a harmless representation? This debate reaches back to an even more fundamental question, namely to what extent Jesus Christ is identical with God; *homoousion versus homoiousion*. The dilemma was first raised at the Nicene Creed of the 4<sup>th</sup> century during which theologians and the heads of the Church attempted to clarify whether Jesus Christ is the *same as* God or *similar to* God, meaning he carries God-like qualities but in his essence, because he is the son in a human body, is only similar to the Great Transcendental. We can translate this to the debate of images, which Hans Belting devoted an entire book to; notably to the ‘real’ and ‘true’ image and representation of the divine (*Das echte Bild* 2006). In order to avoid such complex arguments, or maybe because of the extreme power of images, many religions put a ban on representation.

<sup>10</sup> Outlined by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht elaborated in the chapter *From presence to absence* in the thesis.

Even though, in my understanding, Mitchell (2005) is too 'democratic' when it comes to defining the power of images, among all the theories listed, it is his reading on the relationship of representation and represented that comes the closest to understanding the power of contemporary art. Mitchell argues that our dualism of representation-represented is false and all representations have a life of their own *that is other than the life of the represented*. Signifier and signified form a fusion and as one entity, this union lives a separate life, existing independently yet connected to the represented.

This is the closest to how I see the agency of contemporary art, which is also in line with Alfred Gell. Reading Gell's *Art and agency. An anthropological theory* (1998), one is confronted with the claim that the engagement with art is a relationship, that artworks have a personhood and act like cultural agents. In order to outline this agency, Gell draws up a nexus of encounters between the following participants of the art experience: the artwork that he calls index, the recipient, namely the observer, the prototype that is the subject-matter of the index and the artist, the creator of the index. For Gell, artworks are neither signs nor symbols, but indexes. They do not symbolize or refer to an entity behind the artwork (e.g. picture and sitter), there is not a signifier-signified dualism that would characterize the structuralist idea of language, but the index is somehow part of the entity addressed, like smoke is part of fire. Smoke is not simply a sign of fire, but more than that, it belongs to fire, smoke is therefore the index of fire (1998:11-66).

The artwork (let us say an icon) is therefore an extension of the thing it stands for, yet it has a separate life of its own. This 'life' is so active that, as Gell argues, pictures have loves, wants and desires. Furthermore, for him "artworks ... come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people. ... they have relations with one another as well as with people... they are like people, enculturated beings" (1998:153).<sup>11</sup>

For Gell, these 'beings with a culture of their own' can be of various kinds. Like many other thinkers mentioned above, Gell sees art as a general term which embraces

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, artworks are not human beings, but as Gell explains, they are "holographic fragments of the 'larger unities' to which they are united... Artworks are shares or portions of a *distributed object* corresponding to all of the artworks..." (1998:220). Furthermore, the artist's *oeuvre* for Gell is a 'distributed object' that is not only the index of the life of the artist and the network s/he is part of, but is also a trans-temporal object. By 'distributed object', he means that the object is itself but has extensions and is therefore other than itself at the same time (1998:250). I am me but I am also my lock of hair for the person who is in love with me, and the paper I write. Trans-temporality is not to be understood in a linear time-scale but rather in the understanding of Husserl and Bergson or in Heidegger's account of 'being' or Duchamp's fourth dimension. For a more elaborate analysis see the original document.

various forms of creativity from Maori communal houses, Ancient Greek drawings of mazes, and dance patterns to the silk-screen prints of Andy Warhol. He treats all these artworks as indexes that have specific powers that arise from the interactive relationship they have with their surroundings and backgrounds in manifold contexts. Understandably, Gell does not aim to draw up a theory for the specification of the agency of different artistic styles, as he suggests that the power of these works is different and particular to the very relationship they are part of at a given moment. For Gell, the agency of art in general is defined by this never-steady web of relationships in which all encounters take place among various cultural agents who constantly change the entity and the identity of each other and therefore themselves. The relationship and therefore the players are always in the process of “becoming”. The perception of art from this viewpoint does possibly the most justice as, instead of treating art as a luxury object or an aesthetic, historical statement with which we have a one-way relationship, an artwork without a fixed identity becomes an active cultural agent that interferes with the things of the world. The artwork, as Ziarek suggests, is perceived as a process, as ‘work’. Gell (1998) would agree with Mitchell, as he calls art a “holographic fragment” of reality and artworks “distributed objects”, meaning they are connected to, but only partially identical with the represented. For Gell, artworks are not identical with the object/subject, but are part of it. This approach is different from that of Gadamer and Freedberg who treat images as the embodiment of the represented (signified). The portrait of a sitter is and is not the sitter; it is a creature with a separate existence of its own, it is an index of the sitter with a power of its own.

In order to sum up, by putting the various theories regarding representation on a scale, I argue that there are two extremes: at the one end there is representationalism in which the artwork is no more than a secondary conveyor of a particular message. At the other end of the scale there is the artwork *with a separate life of its own*, in which case the artwork is and is not identical with the represented. The artworks ‘live’ as active agents as if they were living beings with all their complexities and controversies.

It is this latter end of the scale that I sympathize with and have adopted for this research. I, too, argue that the agency of art is other than the signified and has a separate life of its own. I agree with Holly in the sense that the observer brings the artwork to life and what life the artwork has partially depends on the observer. However, I also argue that the

artwork, as an (independent) agent, can exercise its power on us in most unexpected ways. I would even go as far as saying that in some sense it is the artwork that dictates subjectivity.

It is proposed, then, that in order to do justice to any art, artworks should be treated as agents. How contemporary art – the subject of this research - demands to be treated as agency, and how it drags the viewer out of representation is explained through the following examples.

## **2.5 Uncle R – away from representation**

Let us start the investigation with the painting *Uncle R*, (2009) by Moldovan painter, Alexander Tinei. I will begin by describing the work and I will also provide an art historical analysis (see footnote 16). By doing this, I will be able to show briefly how representationalist art history works, in order to be able to challenge it. On seeing this artwork, it is obvious that it has a certain force. Although the piece stops us, there is nothing outstandingly eye-catching in it at first glance. An intriguing image of a boy smeared with blue paint stares us in the face. The work is not showing anything radically out of the ordinary, however, it might generate immediate reactions, such as not wanting to look, or, the other way around, not being able to let go of it. One can sense already that finding various ways to interpret this work is not necessarily an approach that does justice to this painting. Nonetheless, following a general art historical attitude one tries to decode the image.



Fig. 8. Alexander Tinei, *Uncle R* (2009)

We are looking at a 100 x 80cm portrait of a young soldier. We notice the uniform, the pale skin, the dark background. We notice that there are no hands – the composition is oddly cut and the hands disappear just above the wrist. If we assume that the painting was done from a photograph, the image is neither good enough to be a proper photograph nor suitable to be a photo for an ID document. Among our first impressions, we detect the oddly applied blue paint, sometimes carefully applied as part of his face, and at other times in loose strokes seen as painterly indication of veins, tattoos or simply pigment applied onto an image. Aside from the ambiguity, it is the persistent gaze of the boy that does not allow us to move on; the interrogative eyes make us stay with the work. What does this work ‘mean’? What does *Uncle R* represent? These are the questions that need to be answered from a representationalist perspective.

An interpretive art historical analysis would note that most probably *Uncle R* was painted as a reference, a paraphrase to Gerhard Richter’s *Uncle Rudi* (1965). However, *Uncle R* is presented in a way as if he were the artist’s uncle, and from this perspective there is an ownership taken over traumatic family past and historical heritage, representing the

brutality of the war and the hardships of undergoing such traumatic situations. The boy is the victim of political powers that create zombies, walking dead of young people.

Knowing that Alexander Tinei was born and brought up in socialist Moldova, it is easy to see this painting, as well as the artist himself, as a product of his time, that is, a post-communist past (and present) that the artist wants to digest and overcome through his *oeuvre*. Upbringing in a socialist state, with the firm grip of the USSR, marked people for life. This is also how Tinei is often positioned by contemporary criticism, namely as “an absolute product of a soviet culture”.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, it is easy to see this painting in a historical context and place it in the past as some sort of revealing and healing of terrible political memories that haunt one even in the present.

The painting is from the ‘blue stripe’ series of the artist who, for years, smeared his figures with this emblematic blue color and called it ‘tattoo’. The tattooed figure therefore can stand for the marks of life and the marks of the political regime. Such dealing with the Nazi and Communist past has been a central question for many contemporary painters, and has been especially popular in the past fifteen years.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <http://arttattler.com/archiveyoungfigurativepainters.html>

<sup>13</sup> *Uncle R* was painted in 2009, so one can fit the piece into the new figurative trend of painting. Although painting had a universal revival in the past ten years, artists associated with the former USSR countries developed a distinctive voice characterized by a strong technical knowledge, virtuous use of brushwork and often brutal or depressing subject-matter, as well as a reference to the Socialist past. This specific language was initially presented by the New Leipzig School of painting. The New Leipzig School artists such as Neo Rauch, David Schnell or Tim Eitel are emblematic names by now and their work can also be seen as reference to and digestion of socialism. Furthermore, in Eastern-Europe, the Cluj-school of painters since 2005 has become significant in reaching back to issues of war, dictatorship and Communism. Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man or Serban Savu are artists who are making an international name for themselves, often with subject-matter that refers to the political past and artistic heritage. The title ‘Uncle R’ recalls Gerhard Richter’s *Uncle Rudi* (1965) painting, which portrays a Nazi officer in the winter landscape. *Uncle Rudi* is a black and white blurred image in the well-known ‘sliding’ Richter brush-stroke style. The smiling officer, uncle, was photographed during the war and we assume that Richter took this image and created the painting using this original photograph. When painted in 1965, “*Rudi* reminded Germans that many of them — most of them even — had a Nazi in the family. But the painting doesn’t moralize, it doesn’t pity or self-pity, accuse or suggest to Germans how they might consider their own Rudi, their own roles in the Nazi machine. The picture simply presented incontrovertible evidence of something that many Germans couldn’t deny: There was national culpability for what happened. ... Remember. *Uncle Rudi* is confrontation-by-whisper” (Green 2009). Other associations are also possible, for instance the style, the positioning of the body of *Uncle R* and the colors reminds one of the compositions and figures of Michael Borremans (b.1963), Belgian painter and film-maker. In his paintings Borremans reaches back to the tradition of Velazquez and that of Realism. This excellent artist is also the master of ambiguity and rupture, yet his images have an arresting presence. Borremans has a detectable influence as he is very popular in the Central-European region. The aforementioned Cluj artists as well as painters from Hungary are deeply inspired by his oeuvre, by his sensitivity of the positioning of his figures and the haunting enigma that characterizes his art.



Therefore, following a Panofsky-based interpretation and attitude, it is easy to situate *Uncle R* in a politically defined present and past, and look at it as cultural and psychological evidence. Various political and art historical associations can arise in connection with the painting. It can be classified and contextualized, and parallels can be made with other artworks and with issues that the artist, as well as fellow artists, have been dealing with. Still, in spite of all these theories, something remains in *Uncle R* that does not leave us at peace. I could go as far as saying that we do not need to know all these theories in order for *Uncle R* to work on us.

I remember visiting Art Market Budapest with a friend one time when this painting was hanging in one of the gallery booths. My friend spotted the painting from a distance and refused to go closer, physically resisting, planting herself in the middle of the art fair hall and not wanting to move. I persisted that she should see this work and others by Tinei but she exclaimed that she was not in a state of mind to be able to look at a painting as such. Her reaction was striking and it made me wonder about the nature of the force of this painting. What was she so afraid of? We see terrible images around us all the time, especially at an art fair where it is quite natural to encounter shocking, brutal works. I realized that she was not resisting being shocked, but she was refusing to face her own issues that this painting would have brought up.

In this sense, *Uncle R* works on the beholder differently than Lucian Freud or the Raphael. One can tell that the *Madonna* with its presence draws the viewer into a space of beauty, divinity, peace and calm, almost into an otherworldly realm that is above or beyond the torments of the modern mind. But where does *Uncle R* invite us? The *Madonna* has obvious intentions for taking the beholder somewhere, it has an open narrative for taking the viewer out of the present state of consciousness and drawing him/her into this other worldly realm. But what are the intentions of *Uncle R*? Are we just simply seeing a boy, a historical figure crippled by the political powers of the past? What is happening to the beholder exactly? How is it possible that a picture that represents a historical figure can address the contemporary observer, who might have nothing to do with the historical event, *personally*?

*Uncle R* invites us beyond its own narrative. The fact that we are seeing a young soldier fades away and the artwork disturbs, shatters and tears apart. But unlike many

artworks that hunt for effect, it asks for the beholder's personal engagement; it draws us down into ourselves to come up with personal stories. This is not to say that this artwork cannot work as representation, it surely can. When *Uncle R* works as representation, one can engage with it as one engages with historical facts. Certainly, dealing with issues of war moves any viewer, but not to the extent that one becomes afraid of the painting, refusing to engage. What is most curious about this painting is that the young man, an adolescent, obviously a soldier, yet a victim of the war and greater political powers, makes us ask questions about *ourselves*. We feel that *Uncle R* wants to tell us a story that is going to be our story, too. It is the story of being cheated, being raped by history, belittled by politics and superpowers, being looked down upon by our descendants. It is a story of being crippled by something stronger than us, be that politics, our family or an unfortunate encounter in which we are unable to do anything. We stand as victims who carry the signs burnt into their skin. It is the story of being paralyzed while not being able to retaliate against that greater aggression that cripples us for life. It is a reminder that although we can play heroes, we are actually helpless, abused cripples and clowns who let themselves become victims and carry this regret for life. Being subjected to aggression or any sort of abuse against which nothing can be done creates zombies, creatures that are half-dead, half-alive, become non-existent, a memory or a shadow of themselves. The body becomes a flat surface, a canvas that is marked forever by the abuse.

In this sense, *Uncle R* overcomes the logic of representation. By *not* telling, by pestering us to go beyond the (historical) narrative of cultural memory, it invites us to this state of 'ground zero' in which the beholder does not have a choice but to confront his/her own issues of being beaten, abandoned, cheated, forgotten and, in a sense, left for dead. One cannot extract one's subjectivity and close personal engagement from the work.

This kind of personal engagement works with a different logic from let us say (pre)modern art. When it comes to the *Madonna*, Lucian Freud paintings and *Uncle R*, I argue that on the one hand the two former artworks create an effect with a specific intention. They, as agents, intentionally draw the viewer into specific spaces, be it divinity or the torments of the human condition. In this sense, art instructs us to think, engage and feel in specific ways. On the other hand, *Uncle R* as an agent does not direct us anywhere in the sense of the two other works. Instead, one feels that something is still missing if one looks at the work as mere representation. *Uncle R* makes one reach beyond learnt historical

references and one senses that the work is only begins to work if one goes beyond the conceptual structure. If this happens, there is no other way but to start personal engagement. This non-hierarchical, disorderly, non-teleological and *personal* associative manner in which the viewer is not instructed what or how to feel, or which realm to shift into, nor to escape but rather sink into him or herself, might be the agency of contemporary art such as *Uncle R*.

I argue - and it is from here that I might differ from art historians such as Holly – that what the artwork does to me, this ‘freeing of the observer’, is the *property of the artwork*. It is an ontological characteristic of the artwork itself. Let me explain this further through a historical example. Holly contrasts the Renaissance picture-plane ordered by perspective with Medieval manuscript images in which there is no geometrically structured illusionistic space or symbolism, and decorative elements are just as much emphasized as the main theme of the image.<sup>14</sup> She says: “I think it is intriguing to contemplate why many historians, not to say most twentieth-century thinkers in general are driven to think perspectively, compelled to create worlds in which all things fall into place. In this sense – and contrary to the Renaissance interpretation of the system – perspective is not liberating. It is dogmatic and doctrinaire. It admits no disjunctions or contrarities into its scheme. By contrast, the medieval treatment of space could be construed as creatively freeing” (1996:50).

In other words, if Renaissance perspectival picture-plane is binding, instructive and doctrinaire for the observer and generates in him/her the same attitude towards art and life, Medieval manuscript as agents demand nothing from this attitude. Similarly to Medieval manuscripts, contemporary art such as *Uncle R* might be experienced as liberating because it creates a space in which one is not told what to do and it is the intention of the artwork *not to tell*. Presence is not forced onto the viewer. The attitude with which one might approach *Uncle R* is not empathy (meaning there is a particular phenomenon in the artwork I engage with) as one would have with the *Madonna* or with a Lucian Freud work, for that matter. It is rather an inner work in which the image does not demand the viewer to engage with *it*, but demands the viewer to engage with him or herself. While looking at it, the image starts working on me *personally*, it asks me to work on myself. In this sense, the image becomes a mere starting point, an initiator and it builds into me, opens up gates to myself.

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<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the subject see her book *Past looking* (1996:50-57).

## 2.6 Muster as representation and as agency

In order to understand how it is possible for contemporary art to exercise the kind of agency that initiates profound personal associations, the ability of the contemporary artwork to invite beyond representation, needs further elaboration. In the following sub-chapter, to do this I introduce a film. As already suggested in the case of *Uncle R*, I argue that some contemporary art might exercise a kind of agency that helps the beholder revisit and therefore re-imagine his/her personal world 'otherwise'. What needs to be substantiated, though, is this shift from representation to agency, furthermore, towards an agency that initiates personal work. Let me start with presenting the context of *Muster*.

### Background

*Muster* is an 80-minute feature film that consists of three parts; each episode takes place in different times, in 1945, 1970, 1994. The work gives the impression of being shot on HD and that we are watching a professionally directed, enacted movie. Prior to demonstrating how the film addresses the complexity of representation, a short introduction to the work is needed. From the viewpoint of this research, the background information is presented in order to be challenged by the agency of the work.

*Muster's* carefully choreographed scenes are inspired by and involve the Breitenau cloister, a site close to Kassel, burdened heavily by politics. The surface narrative of the work is based on the turbulent history of the site as if we had stepped back in time to see what was happening in Breitenau at those dates (1945, 1970, 1994).<sup>15</sup> The film was created for documenta 13 (2012).<sup>16</sup> The first screening and the installation of the work took place in Kassel at the Hauptbahnhof, an elegant yet industrial site ideal for the exhibition. The film was installed in one of the very dark halls of the station, projected onto three screens in the shape of a triangle; one episode projected onto each screen. Depending on which entrance the visitor used they could choose which screen to watch first (fig. 9.). There was a *mélange*

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<sup>15</sup> A lengthy description of the narrative of the three parts might sidetrack the reader, therefore each part is briefly introduced in the section dealing with that particular part of the film. I deal with the first part, 1945, in this chapter, providing a short description of the narrative in subsequent paragraphs.

<sup>16</sup> Documenta is an international exhibition in Kassel, Germany, taking place every five years. The first documenta was created in 1955 by painter and academic, Arnold Bode, and since then it has grown to be one of the most prestigious venues to engage with cutting-edge contemporary art, issues and ideas that define and are present in the world we live in.

of sounds and one could always decide to switch screens and see what was happening at the same moment in another time period at the same location.



Fig. 9. installation of *Muster*, documenta 13 (2012)

Given the reference to a specific site in the work, a few words must be dedicated to the place. Breitenau, a seemingly insignificant, small German town in which not much happens,- hides a church, a site that has much to tell about people and history. The building (fig.10.), initially a monastery, therefore a place of worship, study and work had been turned into an 'exemplary' venue of control, authority and the manifestation of Foucault's meaning of power: a place of trauma, a place of pain, one could say.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 10. Breitenau monastery

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<sup>17</sup> When writing about power, Foucault argues that practices to treat, exclude, humiliate and control the 'abnormal' or everything that is the 'other' and the not-self, meaning the 'they' and not 'us' have been repeated throughout history. The 'abnormal's' every move is controlled and surveilled and s/he is constantly reassured that s/he can never become a normal human being; never become like 'us'. This approach comes from centralized power; from the panopticon. In the case of Breitenau, the panopticon is the German state represented by the various guards of the site (Foucault, 1995).

The Breitenau monastery functioned continuously as a site of state oppression from the 1870s until 1973. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Benedictian monastery was taken over by the local aristocracy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was turned into a warehouse and later a prison. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was transformed into a correction workhouse for the poor and outcasts of society. The art theorist specializing in Holocaust studies, Zoltán Kékesi, in his book, *Agent of liberation. Holocaust memory in contemporary art and documentary film* (2015) explains that from 1874-1949 the “correction house” (*Besserungsanstalt*) as they called it back then was primarily for homeless people, beggars and prostitutes who were locked up there for an average of one or two years. The living conditions were inhuman and it was accepted that those who were poor and from the lower classes of society were to be blamed for their own misery. The prisoners, meaning those “to be corrected” (*Korrigende*), were separated by gender and were forced to work six days a week, twelve hours a day not only inside the institution and its vicinities, but also for the local farmers and manufacturers who could “rent” the cheap labor from the institute. “Inmates left the building each day in prison uniform under strict control as forced labour. This means that for those who lived in the neighborhood, it became a normal and everyday scene what for us today is one of the scandals of the genocide after 1933” resulting in “*the normality of forced labour*” (Kékesi 2015:190-191).

Breitenau was later remodeled with a cell-system inside and was used for Nazi governmental purposes, housing thousands of inmates, Jews, communists and others. It should also be noted that although the monastery was put to different use over the centuries, the church kept functioning off and on, separated simply by a wall from the prisoners on the other side of the building. After the war, the place was transformed into yet another kind of site of exclusion zone in which “homeless youth, people with sexually transmitted diseases ... were imprisoned” (<http://www.americanacademy.de/de/home/program/past/breitenau-workhouse-project>).

The rest of the history of the site is equally depressing: “By the late 1960s, the institution had become a place for locking troubled young girls away; it had also become the subject of extreme public scrutiny for its harsh methods (brought to light by journalist and eventual left-wing terrorist, Ulrike Meinhof), which led to Breitenau being shut down in 1973. When it opened again later in the decade, it was transformed into a closed psychiatric

hospital” (<http://www.americanacademy.de/de/home/program/past/breitenau-workhouse-project>).

Today, Breitenau is an outpatient psychiatric ward, and part of it has been turned into a museum. In spite of the efforts of the organizers (Gunnar Richter) this site, unlike Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, has not managed to become part of the global memory of sites of trauma, a place that is part of collective remembering and mourning. Kékesi argues that due to the continuous use of the site as a space of humiliation and exploitation, the various phases of historical and political oppression are not only to be understood as individual tragedies of a specific historical era, but the site is enframed by the larger discourse of human cruelty and exploitation. Therefore, the place as a site of the Holocaust, a concentration camp, is just one momentum of “the history of class-based repression and punishment and the institution of forced labour” (Kékesi 2015:194).

### Objects as agents

As one can see, Breitenau is defined by complex and hard memories that are the key subject-matter of *Muster*. 1945 shows us the scene when the American forces arrive at Breitenau, take over the site and discover the prisoners and the labor camp. The prisoners desperately try to explain what has been happening.<sup>18</sup> Aside from the tonality, the images of the film demonstrate the greater complexity of what an image can stand for. An image is evidence. Aside from the narrative, the burning of documents, American soldiers arriving, prisoners explaining what happened, Wedemeyer incorporates unexpected scenes into the film in the form of short pauses in which we can see objects collected and archived (see fig.11. and fig.12.). By making the viewer stop in front of specific pictures, the viewer is made to spend more time with the selected images than the ‘real time’ of the film.

In the scene I am referring to, the liberating US officer goes up to the attic of the Breitenau monastery, which was used as a concentration camp, to take a look at where the prisoners were kept. We are in the dark space of the attic among dirty straw beds, boots and blankets. The officer starts lifting up the objects he finds and shows them to the camera, one

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<sup>18</sup> The 1970 scene narrative is the story of a young film-crew who, as if they were that of Ulrike Meinhof, wants to put on film the life of the girls in the detention home. The third part is of a young school-group visiting the site and the teacher is trying to, yet not able to, bring the message across. All parts are discussed in subsequent chapters.

by one. We see these objects – blanket, ID document, a spoon, photograph, the ‘Jude’ sign in the star, itinerary of the ‘intake’ of Breitenau and so on - in *premier plan*, held close to the camera, each object carefully turned as if prepared for archiving.

Lit by *chiaroscuro* (fig. 11. and 12.) the objects appear as melancholic, historical yet very much present, personal, archived items that are proofs of someone’s life. Or, to be precise, proofs of – as Judith Butler (2004) would say – precarious lives. Lives that are not worth documenting or representing. Showing these objects to the camera in slow motion, letting the viewer spend time with them drags one out of the ‘real time’ of the movie and demands contemplation. Nothing is shown, just a dirty plate, lit by yellow light in the dark. The silence of the scene adds to the sorrow and to the sacrality of the moment.



Fig. 11. screenshot, *Muster* (2012), part 1945

The filming of these objects, and showing both sides and every detail to the camera reminds one of the process of collecting, archiving and listing evidence. We are witnessing the process of the making of ‘the list’; Wedemeyer shows these pieces as if they are being catalogued for trial or for museums, in both cases as factual evidence. In this practice, these objects are treated as representations that refer to a particular represented: to the miserable life of prisoners. For instance, there is an old piece of paper or photograph that used to belong to a detainee. Wedemeyer confirms what can already be sensed: that he did not use props, but used real, authentic objects. Through this act, the artist affirms the intention that indeed these objects should be seen as representation in which case they



refer to something other than themselves. These objects are (similar to) items we see in museums (either art and/or ethnography) that stand as representations of lost lives and perished civilizations.<sup>19</sup>

The display of these objects, one by one, also reminds us of the exhibitions that were organized by the Nazis to display the inferior culture of the Jews. The exhibitions that took place in multiple venues, including synagogues, and were “curated” by Jews. The objects exhibited were confiscated or left behind by the deported. These exhibitions served to demonstrate the inferiority of the Jewish race to juxtapose the Nazi right to the “final solution”. Greenblatt (1991:47,48) explains the case of the Central Jewish Museum:

The ... museum announced that ‘the numerous, hitherto scattered Jewish possessions of both historical and artistic value, on the territory of the entire Protectorate, must be collected and stored’ (Greenblatt quotes Altshuler and Cohn). During the following months, tens of thousands of confiscated items arrived from Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia, the dates of the shipments closely coordinated with the deportation of their ‘donors’ to the concentration camps. The experts formerly employed by the original Jewish museum were compelled to catalogue the items, the Nazi compounded this immense task by also ordering the wretched, malnourished curators to prepare a collections guide to organize private exhibitions for SS staff. ... in March 1943, for example, there was an exhibition of Jewish festival and life-cycle observances... Plans were drawn up for other exhibitions, but the curators, – who had given themselves with a strange blend of selflessness, irony, helplessness, and heroism to the task, were themselves at this point sent to concentration camps and murdered.

Although these objects recall lost lives, they also create a void that cannot be overcome, namely that what remains of these people is evidence of objects and of lists. Still,

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On the other hand, the use of ‘real’ objects has another purpose: Wedemeyer somewhat transforms his fictional film into a documentary that is based on authentic factual evidence. There is tension between documentary and fiction; what is real and what is created? To what extent memories cover reality? How important is it to reconstruct (*re-present*) them? The film cannot be anything but fiction though; an imagined story of how the discovery of the Breitenau concentration camp could have happened.

somehow these objects become those people that perished. Wedemeyer highlights how they can be seen as individuated agents which can 'bring back the dead'.



Fig. 12. screenshot, *Muster* (2012) part 1945

As they are presented in *Muster*, we realize that objects have a dual nature. On the one hand, they are representations of lost lives and cruelty. On the other hand, because of the sacrality of the moment as it appears in the film, we feel that they are more than just archeological remnants of a tragedy. In other words, *Muster* and the scene can be looked upon as representation, but we sense that we are missing out on something. Why the silence? Why the Caravaggio-like staging of the shots? Why the impression that these are not merely objects we are looking at, but replacements or portraits of people or even sacred subject-matter?

Because of this kind of showcasing that surely is unfitting for an ordinary spoon or a plate, the viewer realizes that these are not simply objects to be looked at, but agency in the Gell-ian sense. The people cannot be shown as they are all dead but what they have left behind remains as their extension carrying on a part of them, with a life of their own. The objects are more than the representation of a frozen tragic segment of history. As the site of Breitenau also suggests, events as such are not independent from us, people from a later era of history, but we share the fate of the very same humankind. It is from this moment that the object ceases to be what it is, namely a plate that is the representation of a murdered victim. The plate and the ID document point beyond what they stand for, namely as

representation of lost lives and tragedy. Somehow, they manage to overcome their own objecthood and manifest into something different.

Let me juxtapose this with a personal example that I was reminded of while watching the film. This example has nothing to do with war or the Holocaust, still, the film managed to drag me into a state in which the following memories were evoked. Seeing these objects reminded me of personal objects that used to stand for specific 'people' to me, personally. Losing the little raw porcelain rose my late grandmother had made and had given to me as a child, felt like an absolute tragedy as that was the only object I was left with from her. That rose was dear to me beyond words. Raw, white, delicate, one petal was as large as a fingernail, one could tell it was made really fast and spontaneously, but the petals retained even grandma's fingerprints. What was strange is that this object was different from how I used to remember my grandmother. It was feminine, gentle, delicate, spontaneous and fresh; qualities I never connected with my grandmother. Or maybe I did, but never with my conscious mind.

It is striking to see to what extent we personify the objects of those dear to us, treating them as special creatures themselves and also as an extension of the person they (used to) belong to. Throwing away clothes, emptying apartments after elderly parents die is sometimes postponed for weeks as somehow the objects 'keep the person there', they grant a kind of presence that can, at least for a while, overcome death. What has to be emphasized here though is that these objects themselves are not (simply) the lost person, but they have active lives of their own. The beautiful installation by Rachel Whiteread in the Tate Modern entitled *Embankment* (2005) had been inspired by the artist's mother's death and not being able to pack away her clothes. For the viewer, the gigantic installation made of the casts of the cardboard boxes, had nothing to do with Whiteread's mother. Yet, walking in this huge white architectural installation that was contrasted by the various (in comparison small) size of the delicate casts of boxes was like walking in the architectural setting of a ghost city of our own, personal memories, among various individual stories of mourning, letting go and remembering.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See *Embankment* (2005) <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-rachel-whiteread-embankment>.

In other words, *Muster* as an artwork fulfills a dual function; it embraces the idea of *art as representation* along with the idea of *art as agency*. Both phenomena are present in this film. The objects recorded function as a representation and as a signifier for the lives destroyed. However, they also carry those lives within themselves; they are references, but with a life of their own. It is precisely in this indecisive ambiguity, a limbo between the dual function of the objects that the agency of the film itself lies. Furthermore, there is one additional twist to the film that makes this short scene even more thought-provoking. By showing these objects as part of the film, recorded in the process of showcasing but also in the manner of the making of modern catalogues of objects either of art or ethnology, (the two often overlap) Wedemeyer applies a meta-narrative to the objects and images. He demonstrates museum practice in the process of the creation of catalogues and the making of lists to which these objects will eventually belong. It is the museum that preserves these objects for us, carefully archived, numbered, stored and restored as evidence of lives once lived. Therefore, he does not simply reveal to us the dual phenomenon of the object, but sheds light onto the *discourse that is responsible for the creation of the phenomenon of the object as representation*. This is important, as through this act we can understand why we have a hard time empathizing with these objects – or objects of any ‘evidence’ displayed in museums. Furthermore, the agency of the film itself lies in its ambiguity, the shift between representation and agency, therefore inviting us to reconsider the question of the object as representation or an object with life. The dichotomy of representation versus agency is therefore lifted onto a meta-level and makes us, beholders, exist in this tension when relating to the work, and within that to the objects.<sup>21</sup>

What emerges as the image of these objects is a reference (representation) but also agency that is not frozen into a particular presence but instead, as demonstrated in previous paragraphs, opens up ground for multifaceted personal associations.

In this sub-chapter it was argued that *Muster* has a dual function in the sense that it can be seen as representation, but the artwork itself overcomes its representational nature and starts working as agency. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the kind of agency the

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<sup>21</sup> Wedemeyer’s ambiguous relationship toward representation, the impossibility of representation, the distortion of the original signified by the attempt to represent it and the birth of a ‘frustrated void’ due to the impossibility to picture is analyzed in Chapter Three entitled *From presence to absence*.

work exercises is non-teleological and emerges from the personal encounter, and therefore becomes an *individual*, unpredictable journey for every observer. Artworks as such, by overcoming their own nature as representation, become a space revealed that is a path to associations in a non-driven order. This is a non-teleological space, without any structure and it is beyond any hegemonic value-system. This non-teleological space might be able to shed light onto yet unknown comprehensions of who and how we are in the world, and therefore help yet unknown alternatives to emerge in which we have an other than just cognitive understanding of the decisions ahead of us and their possible consequences.

## 2.7 Towards absence

In recapitulation, there is a need to go back to the initial problem of this chapter: the relationship of art and representation. Heidegger talks about statues of gods and tragedy, art forms from our classical heritage. From his argument, we can also speculate that by looking at the image of the god, we connect with the phenomenon of the holy. But what is there to connect with in the painting, *Uncle R*? The problem with this kind of contemporary art image is that although they invite us into their presence, instead of a tangible entity we find various 'shadows' passing in front of our eyes.<sup>22</sup>

Grasping *Uncle R* is not only difficult because it demands that we reach beyond representation. In the case of this painting, and indeed all contemporary art that chooses this strategy, it is difficult to get hold of meaning because we do not sense what is there to take hold of. Or, to be precise, no matter what we get hold of, one feels that one remains empty-handed. We, viewers, cannot grasp the phenomenon of the image and immerse ourselves in it as we would do with the statue of a Greek God, a Madonna or a Lucian Freud. Instead, *Uncle R* persuades us to stay with its ambivalence. What does this image want from us? As Kitty Zijlmans suggests, the image interrogates. It asks the same questions over and over again: 'What kind of creature are you? What do you want from me?'<sup>23</sup> And given that

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<sup>22</sup> The impossibility to 'pin down' the artwork will also be demonstrated in the case of *Muster*, but for now it is most obvious when looking at *Uncle R*.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication, 2015, Leiden, The Netherlands

we cannot come up with a straightforward answer, we are left in a ruptured ambiguity with manifold impressions.

When we find ourselves in this state, lost in our cultural and personal float of associations, without being able to attribute 'a particular meaning' or a particular phenomenon to the artwork, it is at that moment when contemporary art as 'ground zero' works on us. Its agency lies in its ability to overcome representation, open up space and – *instead of presence – creates absence* into which we can project our inner world, but without being able to come up with 'a particular' solution. Instead of presenting 'a' phenomenon or 'a' narrative, these works of art are able to create space for us to associate, without any hierarchy and order. They open up a space through piercing a hole in the wall of the ego in which subject and object become one, and the viewer can no longer tell what impressions come from the artwork and what associations originate from him/her. This is going down to the bottom, going beyond our carefully structured ego, in other words, beyond our own representation, beyond how we think of and identify ourselves. This empty, yet very much potent space of 'ground zero' is a personal, embodied sensation. Once again, it is able to emerge because the artwork does not enforce its presence on us, or, to be precise, it lets one go beyond its own presence. Beyond presence there is absence to be found, and the 'zero point' characterizes this space of art engagement. I refer to this open space as "absence", and this attribute of the transitional space of contemporary art is examined in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3 - From presence to absence

In the next chapter I take the reader from the concept of presence to that of absence. There is a need to ponder upon these two concepts, as it is argued, and already touched upon in Chapter Two, that contemporary art might be able to draw us into much needed empty spaces. To put it another way, the art experience that I propose to call the 'transitional space of contemporary art', is characterized and conditioned by absence. However, in order to understand how and why the concept of *absence* is essential for grasping the space that the contemporary art experience opens up, there is a need to explore the shift from presence to absence.

### 3.1 Outline

This chapter starts with the elaboration of the art experience as a particular sensation of presence. A 'meaningful encounter' with the work of art, or in other words, when art works on the beholder, is characterized and conditioned by 'being present'. It is argued that many people seek the art experience because they identify it with the sensation of presence. Therefore, in the first part of this chapter, the relationship of art and presence is explored through the works of various theorists.

Further on, I argue that if contemporary art can indeed draw the beholder into this empty space of potentials, the phenomenon of presence does not cover the complexity of the experience. Therefore, the second part of the chapter suggests looking elsewhere to comprehend the contemporary art experience relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: not in presence but rather in absence.

### 3.2 The concept of presence

When looking at a work of art, one is immersed in the experience and is carried away by the visual impression. According to some theorists, people seek the art experience because they identify it with the sensation of presence which brings them closer to their non-rational, bodily self. For them, the art experience can be understood as a kind of *flow* in which they exist above the troubles of work and the constraints of the superego. Furthermore, as art is thought to stand above the everyday life of work, there is a promise that it can make the viewer connect with larger-than-life issues. In literature, the concept of presence is treated as a unifying term which includes all kinds of engaging activities from mountain climbing and dancing, to reading and working or engaging with art. In order to understand the art experience associated with presence, the complexity of this sensation needs to be explored.

What is presence? For me, 'being present' means the sensation of being fully engaged in the moment with the object/activity of one's concentration, blocking out all other activities that might disturb that complete immersion. The actual experience feels as if one is being pulled into an eternal moment, 'taken over' by the object/activity, losing one's ego-boundaries, with the complex nature of the object/activity taking over the self. Given that such states are ecstatic, some argue that people live their lives towards experiencing this loss of ego-consciousness that takes place due to a complete immersion in the moment.

Various scholars have researched and defined presence; one of the most popular definitions comes from psychology. In his book *Flow. The psychology of the optimal experience* (1991), Mihály Csíkszentmihályi studies the question of happiness which he identifies with the experience of flow, namely being fully present and completely immersed in an activity or particular situation we find ourselves in. We can think of activities such as dancing, mountain-climbing, sports, playing a game, making love, working and so on. When one really engages with these activities, time stops, everything else other than the activity stops existing and one unites with the sensation inspired by the activity. This is what Csíkszentmihályi calls 'flow' and defines it as: "... the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is *so enjoyable* that



people will do it even at great costs, for the sheer sake of doing it" (1991:4, italics, DV). Why do people put themselves at great risk in order to experience flow? Philosopher John Gray, in his book on human nature, *Straw dogs. Thoughts on humans and other animals* (2002:113) argues that this urge comes from the irresistible desire to return effortlessly to our animal nature without feeling guilty. According to Gray, living without a sense of guilt is a state people strive for. Gray explains that there is a constant voice in our head that evaluates and supervises, telling us what we did wrong and sometimes complementing us on our performance. This is the mind, and, within that, the superego talking, whether we are conscious or unconscious of it. In everyday life we do not let ourselves get out of the grip of the superego to live truly within our animal nature. Yet we all desire to live 'lightly', less burdened by morality, which Gray calls pure hypocrisy. States of presence or flow overcome the always surveilling master, the superego, and allow the person to exist – even if only momentarily - without shame.

What is flow exactly? Although Csíkszentmihályi tries to restrict all types of experience of immersion, including the art experience, to the sensation of a blessed state of oceanic unity, of *flow*, I argue that this state of mind is far more complex. When looking at art for example, a viewer is faced with an unsettling encounter with the aesthetic: "...like being hit in the stomach. Feeling a little nauseous. ... overwhelming feeling... I have to... calm myself down"(Csíkszentmihályi 1991:107). Although Csíkszentmihályi sticks this one sentence into his argument on flow, this is where he leaves it and unsettling experiences of immersion do not reappear in his argument for the explanation of flow. As I see it, presence, or what Csíkszentmihályi understands as flow, can also be unsettling and disturbing; it does not always have to be ecstatic and harmonious. What is common to all aspects of flow or presence is 'oneness', or in other words, a coming together of subject and object, but there is no guarantee that this immersion will be a pleasing sensation. If this is the case, the state of presence or flow is better approached, not as a feeling, but rather as a particular *state of consciousness* that is a different dimension from feelings. In order to explain what I mean by this distinctive state of consciousness, from now on I will only use the term 'presence' instead of flow, as the latter is often generally connoted – mistakenly, I think – only with harmony and beauty. In order to grasp what presence might represent and what relevance it has for the arts, I will dedicate a few paragraphs to the German scholar, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and his take on the topic.

In his seminal book, *Production of presence. What meaning cannot convey* (2004), Gumbrecht sheds light on the complex experience and potentials of presence. Although he describes the state of presence as self-contentment, ecstasy, peace, unity and security, immersion or sometimes as a blessed state of emptiness (2004:97-102), he takes the focus off the sensation and presents it as a *state of consciousness*. To better understand presence as a state, he introduces the expression 'presence-culture'. Unlike Csíkszentmihályi, Gumbrecht does not argue that it 'feels good' to be in presence-culture. He argues that it is a distinctive 'way of being' in the world, which includes the art experience.

What exactly does Gumbrecht understand by presence and what does he mean by presence-culture? It is important to go deeper into the exploration of these concepts in order to understand the relationship between art and presence and how it relates to art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gumbrecht describes presence-culture through an analysis of the "cultures of the past". On the one hand, he reaches back to medieval culture and compares it to our current (then end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) society. He makes a distinction between now and then, and explains that today we live in a meaning-culture that is characterized by the mind, including phenomena such as human eccentricity, a structuralist interpretation of knowledge, the importance of action, the concept of a linear time dictated by the clock, the significance of innovation, a dualist differentiation of self, etc. On the other hand, he sees medieval (presence) culture as centered around ideas such as inherent meaning, body-mind-soul unity, body that is part of cosmology, revelatory knowledge, magic and space (as opposed to time) (2004:79-86).

If one wanted to contrast these two cultures in two symbols, one could say that in the meaning-culture of the West, psychoanalysis is used in order to deal with larger-than-us issues. However, in Afro-Brazilian cults, in which the 'presence' element is stronger, *pai do santo*, the state of being possessed by a god, in order to resolve any type of inner or outer conflict is evoked (Gumbrecht 2004:88-90). In other words, Gumbrecht implies that our society is that of the world of meaning, whereas pre-Enlightenment cultures or some non-European cultures even today are characterized by the concept of presence. The two focuses result in very different solutions when conducting our lives. Gumbrecht argues that by excluding aspects of presence-culture we lose synchronicity and peace with ourselves. Of course he acknowledges that in our world obsessed with meaning there is a presence-side to things but we tend to bracket it and push the meaning aspect to the foreground. Practices in

the service of the making of meaning are privileged over practices of presence, so for instance when it comes to the treatment of depression, psychotherapy combined with antidepressants is considered more effective than meditation or healing with energy.

Yet, Gumbrecht (2004) argues that late 20<sup>th</sup> century society also acknowledged that meaning is a one-way street that only addresses a very limited segment of how people are in the world. In *The birth to presence*, quoting philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, he argues there is “nothing we find more tiresome today than the production of yet another nuance of meaning” (Nancy in Gumbrecht, 2004:105). Therefore, with the age of post-structuralism and deconstruction, the era of meaning is mourned, but no alternative has been established, philosophers have shied away from reinventing a new alternative after ‘the age of sign’.

What is to be done? When asking which direction philosophy should take after the post-structuralist turn, Gumbrecht detects a general disillusionment regarding the establishment of yet another variety of discourse for the understanding of meaning. Gumbrecht is neither a new-ager nor a nostalgic idealist. He does not call for the reconstruction of some long-gone Golden Age myth of a perfect traditional social model based on faith. Nonetheless, he realizes that in order to make any sense of the world and not make the mistake of constructing yet another world-view that will later be considered as a useless, outdated theory, we, as society, have to look beyond meaning. He proposes that we move our focus away from a quest for meaning, suggesting that we reestablish our contact with the things-of-the-world outside interpretation. He does so by reintroducing the concept of presence in its extreme temporality contrasted to meaning bound by time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This attitude corresponds with the one outlined in Chapter One. Indeed, what if in academic disciplines, too, we tried to understand existence and ways of being in the world outside structure, the framework of language and the relationship of signifier-signified? As a close friend, psychoanalyst Eric Harper, puts it: “... what if man and women were a poem and not a signifier, following the beat of the drum and rhythm that is both in and outside language?” (Harper 2014). Eric Harper continues with a powerful thought that draws our attention to the physicality (as opposed to the rationality) of existence: “Working in the tradition of Nietzsche the signifier, as with Apollo’s name which etymologically means ‘the shining one, the deity of light’ does not bring illumination to what happens between the man and the women, or love between men. Instead one finds oneself in a force field, becoming a love poem, Dionysian state, an intensive state, effect, even compulsion to frenzy, intensification. A dancing body, a rhythmic frenzy of movement across the lips, throat, trunk, arms, legs not confined by the genital zone, phallus, a passage from self to anonymity through the dissolving, annihilating of the weight and burden of signifier into being nothing more than a voluptuous ecstasy, pleasure. It is to enjoy, be over-come with your Dionysian becoming” (Harper 2014).

### 3.3 Presence and art

Gumbrecht sees art as a possible 'practice of presence' in our culture that he understands as being bound by meaning. He explains how practices of presence in art operate through the example of the Japanese theatre of *No* and *Kabuki*. "*No* pieces, in particular, and their music is breathtakingly slow and repetitive. But if you... resist the wish to leave the theatre after the first half hour or so, if you have enough patience to let the slowness of emerging and vanishing of form and unformed presence grow on you, then, after three or four hours, *No* can make you realize how your rapport to the things of the world has changed" (2004:151). This "rapport to the things of the world" is a different state of mind through which one does not only reevaluate, but senses the things of the world differently, as Gumbrecht puts it, "the things of the world" come "close to our skin" (2004:106).

Gumbrecht also applies this state of mind as characteristic of the aesthetic experience in visual art in general, when time somehow disappears and the artwork hits the viewer with its temporality whilst s/he welcomes the risk of losing him/herself. In this shattering of the ego-consciousness, there is a loss of self that Gumbrecht - using Heidegger - calls the "unconcealment of Being" that appears in "Dionysian rupture" with "Apollonian clarity" – (a Nietzsche-ian coming together of the two drives that make up the 'good work of art')<sup>2</sup> (2004:118).

Gumbrecht understands the aesthetic experience as one that can take the beholder to the state of presence: "I believe that we are always... referring to epiphanies when, in our specific cultural situation, we use the word 'aesthetic'. We are referring to... epiphanies that, for moments at least, make us dream, make us long for, and make us perhaps even remember, with our bodies as well as with our minds, how good it would be to live in sync with the things of the world" (2004:118).

The state of consciousness can best be articulated through the example of the *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505) by Raphael, referred to in Chapter Two. When recalling the experience of seeing this picture straight after looking at the Kunsthistorisches' Lucian Freud exhibition, it is easy to see what this space of presence might represent. In the case of

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<sup>2</sup> See *The birth of tragedy* (1995) by Nietzsche for his distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian.

the *Madonna*, there is a manifestation of bliss, a stopping of time, being drawn into harmony, a state of eternal calm and order. However, it must be noted that the Lucian Freud exhibition was also of pure presence, as the artworks were so powerful that they felt almost invasive. Therefore, this 'sync', that Gumbrecht refers to, is not identified with pleasant feelings, joy or other, it is rather a state of consciousness in which everything is in place, both the good and the bad. Gumbrecht feels that in today's culture it is art that is able to point us toward this state of consciousness. The separation that we experience with the 'things-of-the-world' in our world of work when our hunt for meaning disappears and we just 'are'.

Gumbrecht is not the only one who argues that art can take us back to this world of 'oneness', whether comfortable or not. The 'sync' Gumbrecht talks about evokes the kind of nostalgia described by Heidegger, who would argue that the bodily sensation of presence is able to drive us back to our authentic *Dasein*, and show us a path out of our unauthentic 'they-self', bound by technology and utilitarianism. In the following paragraphs I propose to explore Martin Heidegger's concept of presence and art. Although the philosopher of *Being and Time* articulated these ideas in 1928, Gumbrecht was relying on them in 2004, and we shall see how we are able to use them today, for contemporary art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Heidegger - Presence-at-hand

Gumbrecht touches upon a very physical identification with the artwork in which the bodily intensity of the experience is dependent on a *rupture* in time. This rupture can lead to the artwork, with its all immersing presence, overpowering the beholder, and enabling a union between subject and object to take place. The ego-boundaries shatter and there is a coming together of viewer and art. Just what special quality might art have in order to be able to draw us into this timeless zone of 'being there'? Heidegger's view on the subject can help us to understand this special force of art.

Presence can be seen as a rupture in time, in other words, time stopping, a timeless zone and it is from here that Heidegger's concept of *presence-at-hand* departs, and yet takes us to, art. Let me explain his concept of *presence-at-hand* first. The *presence-at-hand Dasein* of things refers to their own existence without being defined by and bound to context or purpose. They just 'are' for and in themselves. This is in contrast with the *readiness-to-hand*

type of existence through which the phenomena of the things of the world appear as relational. A hammer is there to hammer with, an image is there to represent, or a partner is there to love us; we treat and think of the things of the world as equipmental and relational. So can anything be seen for itself alone? Heidegger argues that this is where art can help. He believes artworks can be experienced as *presence-at-hand* beings, given that they are not born with a utilitarian goal in mind. Artworks can or cannot have (different kinds of) impact, however this impact is not predefined, but emerges from the nature of the encounter (Heidegger 1962).

Let us stay with *presence-at-hand* for a moment. How can a landscape or a portrait of somebody be a *presence-at-hand* entity? It is easier to see what Heidegger means by the sensation of presence when it comes to (pre)modern art. When standing in front of the Raphael *Madonna*, one is struck by the perfect, ideal beauty, peace, majesty and immobility of the figure. The geometric structuring of the figures juxtaposed by an imaginary landscape takes the viewer into a heavenly moment of immobility, out of the course of time. A similar sensation can be experienced when standing in front of Mark Rothko's *No 61. (Rust and Blue)* (1953). One is overwhelmed by the depth of the blue, the hazy edges and finds an oceanic comfort both in the texture and in the colors of the painting. In both cases, the presence of the artwork overpowers the observer and draws them into a state of union by overstepping ego-boundaries. This immersion with the artwork might even become a physical sensation. This would be one way of understanding Heidegger's idea of presence.

The other way (and the two are related) is a process in which we actually experience the transformation from *readiness-to-hand* to *presence-at-hand*. Let me explain. The way a work of art is able to transform different modes of being-in-the-world into presence-at-hand existence is best understood by Dada and post-Dada artistic practices. Heidegger argues: "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling... It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise'" (Heidegger 1962:34:207).

This "complicated frame of mind" is clearly visible in the case of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage and others. This is what John Cage does when he uses the sounds of equipment in his performances (e.g. *Water walk*, 1965) or Marcel Duchamp with his ready-mades (e.g. *In advance of the broken arm*, 1914). With other artists this is also the

case, although less visibly. A portrait by Lucian Freud is not only the portrait of that particular sitter, but also the expression of the 'human condition' through the lines and colors of the face presented to us. This revelation of the 'presence' of a particular phenomenon (in this case what existentialist philosophers like to call 'the human condition', or what Lucian Freud referred to with very Heideggerian terminology as the "honest revelation of truth" [Lucian Freud exhibition, Kunsthistorisches, Vienna] appears in most successful artworks.

Both Duchamp and Cage take objects or sounds out of their original context. Cage takes noises out of their ordinary context and encourages us to listen to them as music. The splash of water or the noise of an electric mixer become part of a musical performance. Duchamp's snow shovel extended from the ceiling will be seen as an object in its own right, without a teleological purpose and we are asked to contemplate its existence detached from its function. What actually breaks here – as I argued in Chapter Two – is the line of representation. When presence arrives, *readiness-to-hand* disappears. As Gumbrecht quotes Jean-Luc Nancy: "The delight of presence is the mystical formula par excellence ... and such presence that escapes the dimension of meaning has to be in tension with the principle of representation" (2004:57).

One can argue that this rupture of relational being, or the transformation of *readiness-to-hand* Dasein (meaning, objects to be used) to *presence-at-hand* Dasein (things that exist without any teleological goal) is one tool that some artistic practices use. Why is all this important? Heidegger does not see art as being created for fun only. Art has a responsibility, namely that it should show us the path back to ourselves. As he puts it, art should lead us back to our authentic *Dasein*, that is in tension with our unauthentic *Dasein* defined by the 'I-they' relationship.

With the 'I-they' relationship Heidegger refers precisely to the aforementioned equipmental existence. 'I-They' relationship is the connection with the things-of-the-world in a way that we become part of a larger than us system defined by power in which we also become dutiful workers. We do not realize to what extent the world 'out there' (that we are also responsible for shaping) is taking over our 'authentic' existence in the world. Heidegger writes:

In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another

dissolves one's own *Dasein* completely into a kind of Being of 'the Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness (Heidegger 1962: 27: 164).

If - with the aid of art – one can step out of our inauthentic *Dasein* defined by the I-They relationship and find the way back to one's authentic self as Heidegger seems to suggest, the lesson one can learn from his understanding of art is far reaching. *Presence-at-hand* experiences such as art might offer a path back to ourselves from the world of technology that creates the I-they, inauthentic way of being-in-the-world.<sup>3</sup> "The art work opens up in its own way the being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this revealing, i.e., the truth of beings happen in the work. In the art work the truth of being has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work" (Heidegger 1978:166). Creating means to let something emerge as a *thing*, as a *being in itself*, to bring being out of its concealment (1978:180).<sup>4</sup> Art, according to Heidegger, can help to reestablish the bond and reveal the *presence-at-hand* being of entities. In order 'to save' us from the technological existence circumscribed in *The question concerning technology* (1977), there is a need to re-establish something that has been lost. In my understanding, Heidegger is implying that art is able to reveal the *presence-at-hand Dasein* of things that might have a great impact on how one conducts one's life and makes other than meaning-based decisions.

I would like to conclude this section with a quote from Heidegger that demonstrates the level of importance he attributes to art. In his impressive and sensitive summary on the works of Heidegger, philosopher Michael Wheeler (2011) writes: "In so

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger's critique of a technology-driven society is long and complex. Therefore I will summarize using an insightful analysis by Michael Wheeler: Heidegger was of the conviction that a technological way of being is ruthless, reductive and instrumental, treating nature and people as objects to be used for other instrumental purposes. Rivers exist therefore for us to build hydroelectric plants on, chats in the bar among buddies turn into 'networking'. Heidegger argues that this can be escaped through poetry (Wheeler 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Although greatly fond of art, Heidegger is very critical of the art world. He thinks the art world puts a constraint on the emergence of truth, therefore it disables the work of art. The art world conceals the true nature of the artwork and it cannot shine through the technology the art world imposes upon the piece.



doing such artworks succeed in bringing us into contact with the mystery through their expression of dwelling (poetic habitation). In listening attentively and gratefully to how Being announces itself in such artworks, humankind will prepare themselves for the task of *safeguarding*".

What Wheeler notes here refers to the responsibility of art as seen by Heidegger, and it is indeed major. To Heidegger, art is able to guide us back to 'Being' that is beyond technicity, beyond relationality and dualism. Heidegger's understanding of art can be likened to some type of almost mystical experience.<sup>5</sup> However, if we listen to Gumbrecht, we understand that this state of mind is actually far from being mystical and doubtlessly many (pre)modern or even contemporary artworks are able to generate the sensation Heidegger refers to. As Gumbrecht puts it, art is able to "bring the things of the world close to our skin". What is meant by presence and this remarkable force of art to drag the viewer out of everyday, profane concerns as explained by Heidegger and Gumbrecht, meet 'being' in a secession of time. One can argue that indeed, art has a force that it is most important and valuable to engage with. However, although it is crucial to accept this special force of art, I argue that the specificity of contemporary art lies in something else, namely not simply in presence, but in creating space that I call *absence*. In the subsequent paragraphs I explore this potential opening up of a space that is beyond presence.

### **3.4 From presence to absence**

One can understand how (pre)modern art draws the viewer into a state of presence and how, often through a particular statement, it leads the viewer into some kind of union with 'larger than us' issues, and even into a connection with the core of being. As Heidegger and Gumbrecht demonstrated, during such encounters, pleasant or unpleasant, as, a kind of 'sync' may occur with the artwork and with the things-of-the-world.

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we find a lot of commonalities between these thoughts and Zen practices for instance. It is interesting to note that John Cage was a Zen practitioner and Dada is the art form that many Zen practitioners appreciate, Zen koans are also very much like Dada poetry and mentality. Cage demarcates the exact time, questioning the whole notion of sound production.

Presence becomes especially tangible in the case of artworks with a statement. When looking at Impressionist artworks for instance we are invited back to nature, while when looking at Madonna paintings we are embracing Beauty and Virtue. When confronting the German Expressionist, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's depressing soldier portraits and war scenes, we lament the terror of war and the aggressive nature of the human being. For instance, in the case of Emil Nolde's religious paintings and etchings, we are reminded of a communion, a type of closure we would all expect to see from religion and would be glad to embrace with fellow human beings. So in many artworks presence comes intertwined with statement. However, I think that for the contemporary art that is of interest for this research, the strategy might be different. Contemporary art does not invite the viewer into anticipated states of consciousness that appear to be inherent to the artwork. There is not a state of consciousness beyond the ego-boundaries into which the viewer can immerse. How, then, does such contemporary art work?

As referred to earlier, Ziarek, in his book, *The force of art* (2004), argues that contemporary artworks have an ability "to let be". I have borrowed this expression in order to explain the strategy that contemporary art may use. But first, to build up the argument, there is a need to place this concept in context.

Ziarek, along with Heidegger, sees the force of art in taking us outside the power game we are subjected to by society. In this game, the individual is seen and looks upon themselves in terms of how much good and gain s/he produces for society, its organizations and members. One is enframed by a utilitarian mindset through which one thinks of the things-of-the-world (including oneself) as beings with a specific goal and use in mind. In modern society, the power that defines how we are in the world can be called technological. Ziarek (2004:40), following Heidegger, argues that art has the ability to "figure force otherwise than technologically". This means that art can point outside and onto the social structure we are bound by in everyday life, which is a technological, therefore always an equipmental, type of existence.

In order to outline the force (and not the power) of art, Ziarek introduces the term 'letting be', in other words *aphesis*, which denotes "a releasing, a letting be or a letting go, deliverance, and even liberty" (2004:22). He sees the working of art in terms of its ability to introduce a force that is not pre-determined according to society's laws of production. Instead, "...aphesis' denotes a reorienting of forces that frees them from their confinement

within the operations of power. ... When conceived as aphasis, art's force can be understood beyond the dialectic of power, that is, a field of nonpower, where forces are no longer tethered by the logic of production or formed by the momentum toward increase of power" (2004:23).

Simply put, Ziarek believes that contemporary art can free us from the operation of power, a structured social order in which we are bound by laws and rules. Nothing radically new has been said so far. A parallel has been drawn here with the ideas of Heidegger who understands this liberating aspect of art as a release from the inauthentic *Dasein*, from the I-they self. As discussed previously, an analogy can also be seen with how Gumbrecht understands 'sync'. Art is able to overcome this structure through a force that is unlike power, as it does not point towards any particular thing or process to be achieved or embraced. It is through this "poetic", rather than technological type of existence, that art is able to draw us in.

This argument has already been presented when discussing Heidegger. However, where the unique nature of contemporary art comes into the picture is with the concept of 'letting be'. To me, this letting be, allowing, opening up of a space in which, as Ziarek argues, the things-of-the-world can come to us "otherwise", namely differently, not predefined by laws of society and production, sounds like a space into which the observer, although drawn into the present, is not invited into any *specific*, predefined kind of engagement. 'Letting be' in the case of contemporary art is unlike the 'sync' Gumbrecht and Heidegger suggest. This letting be is not 'truth manifest', it is rather a space, a non-place, a lack into which the observer of contemporary art can welcome all types of random associations. Ziarek attributes the ability of 'letting be' to all artworks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde and those of today. I personally do not agree with this analysis, and it is my disagreement with Ziarek that stands at the core of my argument for absence. Let me explain.

Ziarek tries to convince the reader that Futurist paintings, for instance, aim to point beyond the social structure they are critiquing by highlighting the essential power beyond technology. In my opinion, Futurism does not present or critique the power structure of technology driven-society, but highlights the force of technology that is not, as Ziarek claims different from, but *is* the core of the power structure it eventually works within. In other words, in Futurist paintings it is the very being of the power (behind technology) that is presented, and is grasped as an entity in the artwork. There is a tangible statement on a

phenomenological basis. This ability to *present the force* (of technology) is very different from 'letting be' and allowing the emergence of space. Drawing into the 'force of being' which is beyond technology is still the evocation of that force; it is still a directed engagement with the 'things-of-the-world'. I argue that contemporary art operates differently. Unlike modern art, contemporary art is not opening up towards the engagement with any kind of specific existence. (Pre)modern artworks such as Kirchner's paintings or Nolde's can be seen as equally tormenting, traumatic and traumatized. They come with a tangible 'world' beyond the world as we know it; nonetheless, there is something 'there' for us to engage with. In the transitional space of contemporary art, as in the case of *Uncle R*, there is nothing, or probably too many things, beyond the image. The artwork demands a multi-layered reinterpretation of who we thought we were. Once beyond the image, the viewer develops a dialogue with themselves through which yet unknown depths of what s/he possibly can be, surface. The artwork opens up an empty space, an absence, a 'ground zero' that allows all kinds of past and present fantasies, memories, sensations to emerge without control, direction or structure. Surely this is a very different kind of engagement from the immersion with Raphael's *Madonna* where presence, which also takes one beyond dualism, is there with its tangible force.

In the case of *Muster*, the artwork 'lets' an undetermined, non-teleological way of being in the world emerge in which one can 'feel' that the various layers of one's personality – cognitive, emotive, unconscious etc. – have no structure and they all float within us, interrelated, constantly suggesting different constellations of who we think we are. The contemporary artwork does not necessarily presuppose any emergence of 'sync' with the world. Instead, once beyond the ego-boundaries there is a deconstruction of one's personality.

### **3.5 Absence is the case**

This deconstruction and reworking of ourselves through the artwork in the case of some contemporary art can happen in its extreme complexity. In order to demonstrate just how absence emerges and characterizes the transitional space of contemporary art, I will revisit the film *Muster/Rushes* (2012) by Clemens von Wedemeyer.

As indicated in the previous chapter, short snapshots of this film can evoke complex streams of associations. In this sub-chapter I highlight how *Muster* is not only able to open up space in which we can engage with the complexity of free associations, but also grasp the impossibility of representation, thus addressing what cannot be represented. In this sense, *Muster* gives a clear example of absence as something that *is not*, in *Muster* it becomes the case.<sup>6</sup>

### Muster and absence

What takes place in *Muster* is the encounter with two kinds of absences; one is *space* in which we are able to engage with our associations, the other is absence itself, a *void*, in this case the void of trauma. The way this void manifests in *Muster* is unique and is particular to the transitional space of contemporary art in works that are able to open up a space of absence. Before I concentrate on the exploration of absence, it is important to mention that *Muster* can be positioned as a Holocaust film adding a new voice to the understanding of Holocaust as collective trauma. Although the identification with trauma in general is touched upon, I should emphasize that I am not looking at this piece from the perspective of Holocaust studies which has a vast literature in itself. Authors such as Marianna Hirsch, Ernst Van Alphen, James E Young or Didi-Huberman have contributed to this field with significant studies, notably to the question of the Holocaust and contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> However, this is not the approach I intend to follow, although the subject-matter of the work would demand the addressing of such issues. Instead, I aim to focus on the *strategy* used by *Muster*, and many contemporary artworks, in order to see how and what kind of impact they possibly make on the observer which I expect has an impact beyond the representative realm of the artwork.

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<sup>6</sup> I purposefully do not use expressions such as 'shows' or 'demonstrates' because this is not how it happens.

<sup>7</sup> Their important works include: Hirsch, M. (2012), *The generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. New York, Columbia University Press., Van Alphen, E. (1997). *Caught by history. Holocaust effects in contemporary art, literature and theory*. Stanford, Stanford University Press., Young, J.E. (2000). *At memory's edge: after-images of the Holocaust in contemporary art and architecture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., Didi-Huberman, G. (2008). *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz*. Translated by Shane B. Lillis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Let us now explore what strategies *Muster* uses from the point of view of absence. I will show that the representative elements of the film are nothing more than a surface narrative. The reason why this film is able to make a unique impact is that it directs one beyond representation not to presence but to absence. The background to the film was already explained in the previous chapter, so let us focus now on the scenes of the 1945 episode. The liberating American troops bring along with them not only a cameraman, but a woman photographer a reference to such emblematic photographers as Lee Miller and Margaret Bourke-White, people who first set foot in the former concentration camps during and after the liberation, photographing and filming the scenes (Kékesi 2015). Kékesi describes this encounter as a first (almost anthropological) contact with the unknown. The camera keeps on changing angle; sometimes we see what the cameraman is filming and at other times the camera changes to what the camera of the woman filming might have recorded (fig. 13. and fig. 14.). As one looks at the images of the detainees and soldiers, one understands that sometimes one is watching an actual film and at other times the camera's lens is that of the female photographer. I would like to draw attention to one interesting part of the film.



Fig. 13. Screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1945



Fig. 14. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1945

When we look at the soldiers and prisoners through the eyes of the woman photographer we are shocked to notice that they are posing. At one point she says: “They are acting, we need to stop this.” They are acting to the point that some of them, like the young soldier kicked to the ground, want to look good on camera, and one man even decides to smile for the camera, aware of being recorded. This therefore goes back to the problem of representation elaborated upon in the previous chapter. We are reminded again that representation can never be the thing represented, it is always something else, essentially different in its nature and what happened cannot be reproduced, cannot be brought back to life. Instead, a strange new entity emerges that has ties to representation but is radically different in nature.

The entire 1945 part gives us the unpleasant feeling that we are looking at a half-professional, half-amateur reconstruction of the liberation of Breitenau. It might be that this part is intentionally amateur as the stumbling prisoners with their exaggerated gestures, played by well-fed actors, and the surreal-looking man called René B. with *alopecia universalis* (complete hair loss) look anything but convincing. Nonetheless, we realize that any kind of representation – professional or not – would fall short. Representation – in the sense of ‘re-presentation’ of what had happened – is not only impossible because we are seeing fiction, but in this sense even the documentary would be fiction, too, because what had happened can never be recreated.



Fig. 15. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1945



Fig. 16. Still from *Muster* (2012) part 1945

The ambiguous relationship towards representation characterizes the rest of the 1945 part. Later on in the episode, the bald French prisoner asks the woman photographer to accompany him because “You have to know what has happened here.... Come on it’s important.” So he drags the lady to the yard of the monastery and tells the story of how



prisoners were taken away and shot dead. He explains the tragedy through gestures, imitating the movements, pointing to the ground where graves had been dug (fig. 15.). However, *there is nothing there*. The prisoner is pointing to an empty field and all we see is that a strange looking man is trying to explain a story by pointing around and into the air. What the woman records is actually just thin air. This frustration that comes from 'not-being-able-to-tell' is a constant issue throughout the film. There is a dire desire to show, to reconstruct, demonstrate, but it all remains impossible. Some things can be told, some stories can be shared. But in its essence, how these events actually happened can never be brought back to life. This void, another kind of absence in the form of an inability, emerges in the film and it is *because of this lack* that the artistic statement becomes so powerful. *Instead of wanting to represent* trauma (non)figuratively, the space of trauma, of void, emerges and becomes tangible for us through absence.

In order to clarify what is meant by these two intertwining absences, the absence of representation and the void of trauma, let me show how trauma as void can be grasped, in order to make this 'void' tangible for the reader. Eric Harper is a trauma expert psychoanalyst and psychotherapist who has done extensive work with the homeless, torture survivors and sex-workers. He writes the following about trauma:

... even if the torture is remembered in detail, the hole remains. These gaps in representation place *the person outside of the community of speech*, due to a break in the social bond. The result is that the person is unable to continue to reconstitute him/herself in existence through his/her traditional identifications. Put another way, there is nothing to ground the person, as there is a loss of sanctuary....

To close down space, *to create a 'non-space'*, is to place somebody, a body, in an impossible situation, a double bind in which that person is alive but somehow dead at the same time. Analogous with a caged animal in a zoo, it is a body that is alive and dead at the same time.... .... This is an experience ... of being unable to represent (re-present) oneself to oneself (through having space to speak, dream, play and create) brings about a loss in the capacity for self-representation (2011, italics, DV).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Personal email exchange, 2011.

Harper sees trauma as an inability to represent, to claim one's body as one's own, a person without agency. When healing starts taking place, the person is able to represent, imagine and plan again. S/he gains back his or her ability to create signifiers, namely a (Lacan-ian) Symbolic order (see further Ch.4.).



Fig. 17. Still from *Muster* (2012) part 1970

Let me substantiate this argument from the second part of the film, *Muster*, that takes place in 1970, as this part continues the dilemma (fig.17.). This episode is a reference to Ulrike Meinhof's film, *Bambule* that the famous left-wing journalist and later Red Army Faction (RAF) member wrote and directed in order to show the power structure and the living conditions endured by young women who were sent into reformatory institutions because of bad family conditions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Bambule* itself is about an adolescent girl's detention home in which adolescents of deviant behavior were kept locked away from society under prison-like conditions. During this time the Breitenau cloister functioned as one of the many detention houses in Germany. Meinhof wanted to draw attention to the inhumanity of the capitalist system and initiate the closing down of such places of imprisonment. Initially the film was intended be a comment and a critique of the coercive normalizing policies of the capitalist state, but later on – given that it was not finished by Meinhof but by fellow colleague Eberhard Itzenplitz in 1971 – it turned out to be an affirmation of the power structure. In its final version, the film acknowledges the inability of the girls to live a proper life outside the confines of the institution. *Bambule* had a long controversial story in terms of public screening as the authorities banned it, and it finally appeared on television only in 1994. In the meantime the script started to circulate in residential artistic circles; it was read widely and enacted in theatres. In fact, the script became more famous than the film, and it is claimed to be better than the film itself (<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/bambule/>).

This part of the Wedemeyer film is intended to look like the remaking of the shooting of *Bambule*, focusing on the last scene of the film when the girls break out of the reformatory. Wedemeyer, rather than creating a scene of a girl's detention home historically reenacted, takes a film-crew on screen. We are in the 1970s, seeing a crew making a film about the girl's home. The film they are shooting is not a documentary, but fiction based on the site and on the lives of the girls, enacted by actors. We see actresses rehearsing the part of the girls and simultaneously the 'real' girls (enacted by the same protagonists) are also there.



Fig. 18. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1970

The impossibility of representation is obvious from the dialogue of the two Amélie's taking a walk side-by-side (fig. 18.). Inmate Amélie explains to the actress Amélie that no matter what you do, you will not be able to reconstruct my life. No matter how hard you try, the representation is impossible. As detainee Amélie explains: "What's said and done is convincing enough. But the way you do it, isn't our way. You can't speak the way we do in custody. And vica versa. So it sounds wrong. ... Daily life in detention can't be reproduced in film."

So what remains is the frustrating paralysis of not being able to do it. The actress is there to help, to offer a way out, but the initiative dies off just before it can materialize.

Furthermore, actress Amélie is also trapped in the system that defines her, the system of mediatized reality. As Kékesi (2015:196) writes:

In *Rushes (Muster)*, the failure of the shooting lies not only in the aesthetic (“daily life in detention can’t be reproduced in film”) and political (“I thought the film aims to tell people outside about conditions in here”) dilemmas, but in the functioning of the filmic apparatus as well and its inherent power relations: it reproduces the power relations against which it ought to (make others) revolt, because it places the workers (that is, the actresses) into a subordinated position (“I don’t get who we’re doing this for.” / “Don’t think! Just do it.”). This is why one of the actresses can use a sentence from Meinhof’s script, originally referring to the girl’s reformatory itself, to oppose the apparatus: “Television, get it? They’ll be glad to break you in.”

There is indeed a strong analogy between the power structure of capitalist normalization and the surveillance exercised in institutions of power, and between today’s mediatized society. What is paralyzing in both cases is the inability to act, the impossibility to break out. Or is there a way out to tear down the walls of this (invisible) prison? What can unite detainees with actors, reality with fiction? It is destruction. We are seeing the scene of two girls busting up one of the rooms. They destroy the bed and the bench with such joyful aggression that we want to join in. They also start kicking the walls of the building and – surprise – the walls start falling down (fig.19.). This is when the viewer realizes that what they are actually breaking up is a studio-remake of one of the rooms of the house, and we are still watching actresses playing their part. Finally, the walls come down, they break out and they find themselves in their own Breitenau, namely in the middle of the film studio, blinded by the light.



Fig. 19. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1970

So how does all this lead to absence? The tormenting element in both parts is the confrontation with the impossibility of telling, and therefore making a difference. What actually happened can never become the case again. I cannot feel your pain and you can never reconstruct what you have gone through. The tragedy that took place has either vanished or it is impossible to articulate. It has gone missing, it is impossible to recollect. Therefore, it is *absence that stands as a statement*, it is *absence that is the case*; a haunting void is made tangible. But this void (of trauma) can only emerge *because there is space/absence* for it to do so. The reason why the film is so frustrating to watch is not because of the actual representation the trauma, of pain. Pain is not presented as we usually see it in art, particularly in monuments. The viewer becomes frustrated because it is trauma itself; it is *the void that becomes the case*, not through representation, but through the impossibility of representation, and therefore the lack of it. It is *the emergence of this lack that we realize that trauma is indeed a frozen void*, non-existence, something that is too much to articulate, too painful to face. So the way victims react is through freezing trauma in silence. It is silence and void that can emerge through the confrontation with not being able to tell.

Here, I would like to jump back to the initial dichotomy of presence and absence in order to explain how and why the film that uses absence as a strategy is able to give rise to a very different state of consciousness compared to artworks that act with presence.

### Absence in the art of remembering

The reason why trauma can emerge so strongly is because Wedemeyer chooses a different strategy from other, mostly modernism-inspired artists. In order to '(re)present' this tragedy, Wedemeyer does not picture terror or horror. We do not see distorted bodies in horrible positions, gassed Jews and skeletal bodies; in other words, he does not want to overwhelm us with presence. Nor does he use maltreated, traumatized young vagabonds kept as animals to portray the inhuman conditions of the detention home. He does not create a monument out of these terrible phases of history that afflicted this particular location. There is no dramatization, nor sentimentalization. A short comparative analysis will help to further clarify what I mean.

The usual modernist monuments and interpretation of trauma can be likened to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)<sup>10</sup> with the desperate angel, dead baby and frustrated horse. The *Monument against war and Fascism* (1988-91)<sup>11</sup> by Alfred Hrdlicka in Albertina Platz, Vienna, is also an exemplary case of modernist representations of such terrors. In these and other pieces (fig.20. 21.) one is directly confronted with the tragedy of war and mass-execution. The drama of the event appears (more or less) successfully in these pieces. One looks at them, saddened by the effect and the memories these pieces bring back, even adding a few comments such as "how could this happen?! Those were really terrible times", etc. and then one moves on. After the initial empathy, the artwork does not stay with us, and the distance between the past trauma and life in the present is not overcome. As Krzysztof Wodiczko argues, most of these monuments are characterized by the 'myth of victimization' (Wodiczko cited in Ziarek, 2004:132-39). The myth of victimization is like any other; it constructs a story overloaded with emotions and morals, and it ignores pluralism, complexity, particularity, therefore disabling deep personal identification and attachment. Furthermore, because of its direct reference to history, it creates a distance between the event and the contemporary observer. Contemporary times demand a new attitude to remembering. In contemporary art, this new approach could appear with a different understanding of memory and a new-found humility towards remembering, inspired by the acknowledgement that no matter how hard we try, we cannot reconstruct the past. Maybe

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<sup>10</sup> Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937). Oil on canvas, 349 cm × 776 cm. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Hrdlicka, *Monument Against War and Fascism* (1988-91). Mixed media. Public sculptural installation at Albertina Platz, Vienna, Austria.

it is not even our job to do so. As Aleida Assmann, in her book *Cultural memory and western civilization. Arts of memory* (2013:8), explains:

Many explanations have been offered for the new predominance and enduring fascination of the memory paradigm. They include the decline of modernization theory, with its emphasis on progress and grand expectations for the future; the end of a philosophy of the subject, which focuses on the rational, self-contained individual; the end of one-track disciplines in the humanities, with their ever narrowing range of specialization. Against this background, the subject of memory emerges both as a new field of interdisciplinary approaches and as a problem that impinges directly on many different areas of society in a rapidly changing world.

Studies of memory, therefore, cannot be understood in terms of the modernist paradigm. Modernist type of memory culture can be said to ignore the very nature of remembering and that of memory. As Assman (2013:149) argues, memory is not linear or logically structured, therefore to decode the methods of its operation is a far more complex business than expected:

Parts of our memory can be systematically structured to act as a store, but other parts, which record our sensual perceptions and biographical experiences, generally remain in a productive or destructive state of unmastered disorder. In contrast to our learning (or 'semantic') memory, that of experience (known as 'episodic') remains unsystematic, contingent, and incoherent. What holds it together is the magic web of variable, individual associations.

This intertwined web of associations that surface spontaneously sheds light on the fact that memory is not an organized storage from which we pull out whatever data we choose for a specific situation to aid us in reconstructing the past. Memory, especially personal and biographical memory, cannot be "...viewed as trace or storage, but as a malleable substance that is constantly being reshaped under the changing pressures and perspectives of the present" (Assmann 2013:146).

Assmann suggests that memory always emerges in the light of, and as an inspiration from, the present. She claims that we always start remembering because of a present experience. What we remember and the way we remember is influenced and



defined by the present situation. Therefore, what is remembered (or reconstructed), as the Wedemeyer film also points out, can never be what actually took place in the past. “There is... an unbridgeable gap between current and remembered experience... (Assmann 2013: 155).



Fig. 20. Michael Alfano, *Holocaust Monument* (2001). Jericho Jewish Center, NY





Fig. 21. Holocaust monument, Père Lachaise cemetery

Therefore, Wedemeyer does not present a particular narrative, the emphasis is not on wanting to tell what happened. Instead, as Assmann refers to in works similar to Wedemeyer's, he creates 'new memory art' that "... does not come before but after forgetfulness, and it is neither a technique not a preventive measure but at best a therapy, a careful collecting of scattered remnants, an inventory of losses" (Assmann 2013:345). This is precisely what Wedemeyer is doing; an inventory, as we could tell from the 'cataloguing' of objects in the previous chapter, and he chooses a different strategy for making the body of the trauma emerge that is not tied to history and that can be accessed through the present.

Instead of overwhelming the viewer with a direct, figurative narrative of the horror of historical events, Wedemeyer decided to show it through not showing. Therefore the trauma of being subject to any oppression of power emerges through absence. The void of trauma, a murderous silence, is felt on our skin *not through the means of effect-driven representation, but through the absence of representation*. The most brutal and heaviest silence, the silence of trauma is channeled to us through lack. And indeed, it is through absence that absence, which is void and silence, can emerge in a way that it does not

become tied to any historical event and narrative. It is through absence that absence can manifest itself, and it is through absence that trauma does not remain tied to a particular story, but becomes a universal issue all of us can engage with. Whether we experienced the hardships of World War Two or the cruelty of detention houses, it becomes irrelevant, as surely many of us have traumas that have silenced us in a way that made it too hard to tell, too cruel to face. Through absence, we can engage with the trauma of these historical events because we bring back our own personal traumatic experience and memory. These may have no narrative connection with the story of the historical event that is in front of us. It is through absence that the observer, no matter what background they come from, can find a link to the tragedy of the event.

Wedemeyer has not invented anything radically new. What he does also appears in various contemporary artworks. This type of remembering strategy has been and is being realized by artists, and has been the subject of art historical research and cultural memory studies since the 1980s. Postmodern and post-structuralist thinking about narrative, truth claims, universal and individual memory have been reconsidered by seminal thinkers from Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze through Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Gianni Vattimo to Aleida Assmann and many others. It is not the purpose of this book to introduce the vast field of this new discipline of cultural memory, suffice it to say that many artists discover that by making a particular statement about historical events - be they tragedy or victory - a generalized truth claim is created around that particular event. Instead of allowing the viewer to come up with their own experience, a narrative is given that the viewer is expected to follow, no matter if they can relate to it or not. Nor does it matter if the artwork is doing justice or not to the complexity and manifold nature of that particular event. This is why artworks, especially monuments that are created in the spirit of contemporary art, closely influenced by post-structuralism, evoke a very different state of consciousness, and, in spite of the usual initial resistance, invite more visitors than monuments made in the "modernist" spirit.

This might be the reason why Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* (1982)<sup>12</sup> in Washington, is far more popular than the figurative heroic piece standing next to it by

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<sup>12</sup> Maya Lin, *Vietnam veteran's memorial* (1982). 8000sqm triangular installation of inscribed granit. Washington DC, USA.

Frederick Hart, entitled *Three soldiers* (1984)<sup>13</sup>. The *Three soldiers* was designed to be a 'counter-monument' to the Lin design, but interestingly Lin's 'cut' in the ground invites far more visitors. The piece is nothing more than a triangular pit in the ground, paved by black granite panels engraved with the names of those who fell in the Vietnam War. One has to descend to read the names and while looking for the names one's reflection appears on the shiny black surface. Absence might also be an explanation for the popularity of the Peter Eisenman *Memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe* (2005)<sup>14</sup> in Berlin, where the large concrete slabs become an overwhelming yet private place of contemplation. The gigantic grey blocks that change in size in the wavy landscape create a labyrinth, making the viewer disappear, but, significantly, leaving places where we can be alone, tightly enclosed by big blocks.

Spaces constructed in the name of absence evoke a very different type of remembering. They bring up memories in connection with the event but not by creating a narrative or symbolism; instead there is space for free associations, such as ,in the case of the Berlin memorial, pain, power, loss, being lost, not being able to get out and so on. As one can see, all these associations may be connected to, yet they remain independent from, the actual WWII trauma. Yet, it is through these personal associations that the contemporary observer can find a path to the horror that was endured by the victims of that particular event.

In the same way, in the transitional space of *Muster*, the communication of void (trauma) takes place through absence, namely by *not* telling or articulating, by not showcasing dead bodies for everybody to look at in horror. It is because of this *not* showing, through this absence, that one can engage with the trauma, project one's own inner world and find a path to the actual historical event. As space is given, the trauma becomes everybody's trauma, not just a trauma of a particular group of people in the past who happened to suffer such terror. It is through such artistic strategy that the contemporary observer can make the past present, feel the horror on their own skin and make a past tragedy a present, universal experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Frederick Hart, *The three soldiers* (1984). Bronze statue of three armed men, 1.5 times lifesize, Washington DC, USA.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Eisenman, Buro Happold, *Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe* (2005). 19,000 m<sup>2</sup> (4.7-acre) site covered with 2,711 concrete slabs or "stelae", arranged in a grid pattern on a sloping field. Pls visit the link for precise material and measurements as well as date of planning and execution: <http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/field-of-stelae.html>.

In the case of viewing contemporary art that has gone beyond representation, the act of 'letting be' can emerge. One is not immersed in 'truth' or presence, or with a statement, but instead one finds oneself in an empty space of absence which can allow non-teleological ways of existing in the world to surface. It may cause a revisiting of the complex layers of one's personality, and through a non-directional flow of associations, new alternatives might arise about how one can be in the world. Therefore, it is suggested that although presence has remarkable potentials, absence might be just as important for us now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when there is a need for the potential empty spaces of 'ground zero'.

The question to be answered is just how contemporary art is able to generate absence. The next chapter, *Rupture*, argues that absence does not arise by accident and that contemporary art has a special strategy, or one can say 'force' that opens this space of absence. The chapter theorizes what this force might be and how it works.

## Chapter 4 - Rupture

The previous chapter explored the shift from presence to absence in art and it was argued that the contemporary art experience and its transitional space, is characterized by the state of absence. It is absence, or in other words, the space opened up by some contemporary art, that enables the observer to come up with non-teleological associations and encounter (inner) experiences that might not have been thought of or known about before. The question to consider now is what exactly *is* this special force in contemporary art that opens up the space of absence for non-teleological associations? In this chapter, I will explore the force that might be understood as the cradle of absence, and therefore a possible condition for the 'ground zero' of art.

### 4.1 Outline

I argue that the force of contemporary art which is responsible for opening space for absence can be understood as *rupture*. Some contemporary artworks might be seen as a 'cut' into the body of the social order, as explained in the previous chapter, overcoming the power-structure that binds the subject; therefore possibly opening space for other alternative ways of being in the world. It must be noted that although many contemporary artworks have the ability to create 'a tear', not all types of rift open up transitional space, or in other words, evoke emptiness with potentials. There are artworks that interrogate certain psychological or social frameworks, yet they stay within the (hegemonic) structure they aim to overcome. Therefore, the *rupture* that I am looking for is a special effect of some particular works; it is an act of cutting that pierces right to the core of how we are in the world, demanding profound revaluation. It is a force unique to certain contemporary artworks and this chapter is an exploration of this act. I refer to this special form of 'cut', as 'rupture'.

Firstly, I will introduce how, I think rupture differs from other forms of tear induced by contemporary art. Subsequently, I explore what 'tear' or 'cut' in art might represent in

general. In connection with this argument, I will introduce the idea of shock, and explore the concept of the 'contradictory image' as a factor possibly responsible for rupture. Given that the most extreme form of shock is trauma, a comparison between the force of art as rupture and the nature of trauma is discussed with the intention of getting closer to the nature of rupture. The argument is narrowed down by introducing the ideas of Rancière which in turn leads to the idea that rupture might be able to change our usual frame of references. How might rupture do this, and 'what is it that is torn into?' In order to explain, I will then describe a certain psychoanalytic theory, a Lacan-ian viewpoint of the psyche. Finally, I will outline rupture with its unique impact on the psyche, as well as the possible potentials for rupture in contemporary art.

#### **4.2 The nature of rupture**

My reason for trying to grasp what rupture might represent and why it is important to articulate lies in the idea that rupture is a unique force within the art engagement. I argue that rupture might be seen as an experience through which one could arrive at a state of 'ground zero'; an empty, yet very potent space. From this perspective, undergoing rupture might be seen as a gateway to the experience of 'ground zero'; it might be the condition for such a state to emerge and this is where its importance lies.

Rupture can be seen as a 'tear' inflicted in the social and individual 'body' of the self; there is a shattering of frames of reference and taken-for-granted structures. However, it is clear that the kind of rupture I am looking for is not simply any kind of 'cut'. Rupture as an act is a (non)state, a timeless moment. Through rupture, one arrives at a stopping of time, into a space in which there is no time. At the moment of the 'cut', there could well be a falling apart, an interrogation of all that we have taken for granted. Rupture is not to be confused with 'ground zero' which I understand and use as a space of potentials, elaborated upon extensively in Chapter One. As I see it, rupture is a *condition* in which 'ground zero' can emerge. Rupture might be grasped most easily through a metaphor: Let us think of a long exhalation that takes us down to the core of being. At the moment after the exhalation and before the next breath there is a void, a complete negation in which anything could happen: there might or might not be an inhalation, therefore life. I argue that this moment might

occur in contemporary art and can be seen as the gateway for new alternatives to arise. It is conditioned by this incision (this exhalation) that is able to cut through our conceptual state of affairs.

Bearing all this in mind, the subsequent sub-chapters are dedicated to this quest for rupture. Starting from the effect of shock, and through exploring various forms of 'the cut' in art, non-art and art theory, I will explore whether contemporary art can indeed exercise this complete incision.

### 4.3 Shock versus rupture

As indicated previously, rupture is often associated with shock. The shock phenomenon in art is not a new invention. Art since the 1960s has used shock-value extensively. Performance and other pieces that show extreme sexuality, such as Carolee Schneemann's *Interior scroll* (1975)<sup>1</sup>, Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972)<sup>2</sup> up to the yBa - pieces by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin or the Chapman brothers, and the list could go on, actually live from shock-value and have become notorious examples of shocking art. Although the pieces mentioned belong to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one can look even further back in history to find shocking artworks. It might seem strange to introduce historical works in a contemporary art research. However, I do so for two reasons, firstly I sense that the specific 'tear' I am looking for, namely rupture, is not necessarily the specificity of contemporary art; it can also be found in images of the past. Secondly, the contrasting of the following historical examples demonstrates really well the tension between 'shock versus rupture'.<sup>3</sup>

There are numerous examples in art history portraying people, usually of noble origin, with various disabilities. These images strike the (contemporary) observer as shocking

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<sup>1</sup> Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll* (1975). "Performed in East Hampton, NY and at the Telluride Film Festival, Colorado. Schneemann ritualistically stood naked on a table, painted her body with mud until she slowly extracted a paper scroll from her vagina while reading from it", (<http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/interiorscroll.html>). The monologue contained a 'worship' of the vagina.

<sup>2</sup> Vito Acconci, *Seedbed* (1972). The artist lay under a ramp in the Sonnabend Gallery and voiced sexual fantasies while masturbating under the wooden construct.

<sup>3</sup> I am also aware that through historical examples I suggest that some images are 'transhistorical', however it falls outside the domain of my research to explore this otherwise fascinating topic.

or disturbing, and most likely had the same effect of ‘curiosity’ back in their day.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Diego Velazquez and Jusepe Ribera were known for painting midgets at the royal court; or the famous work by Lavinia Fontana of a woman with extensive facial and body hair, a condition known as *hypertrichosis universalis* (see fig. 22.) still makes the viewer stop in wonder. No matter if the artist aimed to portray this respected noblewoman as educated and honored in court, her physical appearance still remains disturbing and the main theme of the work.



Fig. 22. Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Antonietta Gonzalez* (1595)

Surely, art can hit us with its outrageous nature, but does it remain good or interesting a minute longer than the momentary effect of the shock? Not always. However, there are some artworks that can reach beyond the shock to the extent that although the disturbing image is ‘there’, it becomes a surface-narrative. Once over the shock, the viewer is invited beyond the image, beyond representation and one finds oneself in a space of

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that I am writing from the viewpoint of the contemporary observer and I do not take the historical reception of the works into consideration as it would be a sidetrack.



ambiguity. Such is the case with the Jusepe Ribera's painting, *Magdalena Ventura with her husband and son* 1631 (fig. 23.), now displayed in the Prado.



Fig. 23. Jusepe Ribera, *Magdalena Ventura with her husband and son* (1631)

This Spanish Baroque painting by Ribera, that also goes by the name *The bearded woman*, ‘jumps off’ the museum wall. We see a masculine-looking person who is actually a woman portrayed suckling an infant from an oddly placed breast, with the husband standing in the background. She is much too aged to be a young mother. The odd appearance of the figure is explained in the bottom-right corner of the painting; we find out that the 52 year-old Magdalena, mother of three, suffered from a physical condition that resulted in extensive facial hair-growth after she turned thirty-seven. Magdalene did not have *hypertrichosis*, she was most likely suffering from *androblastoma* that results in a change of the hormone system and a rise in the level of testosterone. Her appearance caught the

attention of the Duke of Alcalá who therefore commissioned a portrait of her. The Duke obviously took pleasure in looking at people with unusual physical features.<sup>5</sup>

One is accustomed to seeing dwarfs, buffoons and people with unusual physical attributes, often treated as ‘freaks’ in the Baroque.<sup>6</sup> After seeing a certain number of these paintings one gets used to them. Therefore, in the case of *The bearded woman* it is not the odd physical features of the woman that makes us return to the painting over and over again. In other words, it is not the represented that draws us back to the painting. Instead, the piece carries way too many contradictions that unsettle us. Why is she breastfeeding in spite of her age? Why is the breast so crudely painted? Why is she so elegantly dressed? Why is the husband hiding in the background? Her facial expression is haunting; the eager look, the sweat on the forehead, the tear in the eye. What is it that this image wants from us?

The image does not make a statement, as the Fontana piece does, instead it questions and *demand*s. It does not let go of the viewer after a simple shock. One could argue that the Fontana piece presents a kind creature, indeed a noble person, who also happens to be extremely hairy. Fontana’s image is easy to read; a possible representational narrative would be that Fontana wanted to overcome the unfortunate physical features of the noble girl by presenting her as a virtuous spirit. However, this is not the case with the Ribera work. This piece cuts into our usual frame of references, we just cannot get hold of the image; it escapes interpretation. We see a ‘shemale’, who is aged, yet breastfeeding, with a husband who is less masculine than she is; in a sense she overcomes the dichotomy of feminine-masculine. She is beautifully dressed, yet there is tragedy in her eyes. She is positioned like a saint, yet she sweats and stands there as an object of study; one can argue that she is between or beyond the sacred and profane. Furthermore, we cannot decide whether *Magdalena* is an agent or an object.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, we do not know what to do with the image. The image cuts into the our usual, taken-for-granted frames of reference and we stand in front of it, stupefied, not being able to let go of the work (I personally had to return to it again and again).

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<sup>5</sup> For further analysis see article on <http://qjmed.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/01/19/qjmed.hcg254.full>.

<sup>6</sup> The Duke of Alcalá who commissioned this piece had several of such works in his collection.

<sup>7</sup> Dualism explained in Chapter Two.

One can already sense that this latter shocking piece operates differently from the Fontana painting. From the viewpoint of rupture, how does this piece differ from other 'shocking' images? What is it that this Ribera painting 'does' that the Fontana piece cannot do? Or what is it that it is able to do that outrageous pieces by British artist, Tracey Emin, for instance, are also unable to evoke? After this short historical introduction to the concept of rupture, in which I aimed to demonstrate what type of experience I am looking for, and show that this 'tear' pointing beyond shock is not new to art, I will now return to contemporary art. Let me explore how current art theory understands concepts associated with rupture and whether they can be used to help us understand where the nature of rupture might lie.

#### **4.4 Condition for rupture – the contradictory image**

It was suggested that although rupture might be associated with shock, shock-value itself is not necessarily enough, or even analogous with rupture. Certain artworks can be shocking, yet they stop at a representational level, and one is not taken beyond the narrative that the piece aims to present; therefore rupture cannot effectively work.

In the following, I introduce a concept through which we might be able to get closer to the rupture created by contemporary art. If it is not shock, what is the factor that creates rupture? What are the characteristics in contemporary art that might bring about rupture? In order to get closer to rupture, I argue that some images carry contradiction within themselves. They are not necessarily outrageous, yet they evoke a momentary pause of thought, creating a tear in the beholder's conceptual state of affairs. In her book *Art, architecture. A place between* (2006), architecture theorist Jane Rendell describes such images with the term 'dialectical image', first introduced by Walter Benjamin. Although Rendell is an architecture theorist, she also uses this concept to explore works of fine art. In the footsteps of Benjamin, Rendell argues that dialectical images carry simultaneously a thesis and an antithesis. Synthesis is actually the image itself. However, in a dialectical image, although there is a "resolving", there is not a reconciliation of thesis and antithesis in the synthesis. Instead, a specific tension arises from the two or more conflicting elements put next to one another. I think of these images as contradictory, and in order to show the

tension these images contain, I am using this expression instead of 'dialectical'. The contradictory elements are not compromised by one another, but they produce an uncomfortable strain that comes from the fact that these paradoxical parts have to coexist within the image. This tension within the image is difficult for our everyday logical, rationally built minds to digest, therefore we find these images shocking. Rendell uses the term 'shock' in a different way than it was used and applied previously. Such images "... create a moment when the usual patterns of thinking and everyday living stop and new ones are given a chance to emerge..." (Rendell 2006:78). Rendell believes dialectical images create stoppages in everyday thinking, which is a progressive way to experience art, as it is a gateway for new constellations. This kind of 'shock' could be analogous with the rupture I am looking for. Indeed, one can easily understand how Meret Oppenheim's widely known *Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure)* (1936)<sup>8</sup>, for instance, drags one out of one's conceptual state of affairs by functioning as a dialectical image in various ways; there is a tension between the cup used for serving tea and the imagined taste of the cup made of fur; there is the dichotomy of the object referring to an elitist get-together that becomes a reference to cavemen and pre-historic times: and most importantly there is the clashing of an object of use with that of status symbols (fur as reference to elegance and money) resulting in an object that – if used – evokes repulsion.

Such pieces really shake one's existing conceptual state of affairs and this is what Dada succeeded in doing and what Conceptual Art enthusiastically rediscovered. In many ways, and from this perspective too, Dada can be seen as a predecessor to contemporary art. It is not surprising that we can discover the same tension within contemporary artworks. It is this 'halt' or 'arresting of thoughts' that we encounter.

Is the impact created by contradictory images the same as rupture? Is this 'arrest of thoughts' or 'stoppage', a complete experience of 'cutting through'? As the example above demonstrates, the *Object* by Oppenheim does arrest us momentarily. But does it tear into our frame of references, bringing our conceptual state of affairs to a complete stop? I suggest that there is a difference. In order to make a distinction between the 'stoppages' of

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<sup>8</sup> Meret Oppenheim's *Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure)* (1936). Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, Cup 10.9 cm in diameter; saucer 23.7 cm in diameter; spoon 20.2 cm long, overall height 7.3 cm. MOMA collection, NY,

contradictory image and what I mean by rupture, let me introduce two artworks and compare how they operate on us.

A central piece of the 2011 Venice Biennale was Urs Fischer's gigantic wax sculpture *Untitled* (2011) (fig. 24., fig. 25.). Actually, three sculptures made up the piece: one was an enlarged replica of the famous Giambologna sculpture, *The rape of the Sabine women* (1583)<sup>9</sup>, the second, *Statue of Rudolf Stingel* (2011), was a wax life-size sculpture of Rudolf Stingel, an equally prominent fellow artist, and the third piece was an office chair, also made of wax. I am writing in past tense as none of the pieces exist anymore, as all three statues were actually live candles with a huge cord through them so they were burning and melting slowly throughout the time of the biennale.

The first thing one was confronted with when looking at the work was its high show-value. Making a sculpture that is the enlarged version of one of the icons of art history burn and melt is a pretty powerful statement to make. Is it taking us any further than shock, as understood in the first part of the chapter? Indeed, the piece might be seen as a contradictory image. Whenever we think of the Renaissance and its artworks, we think of a timeless tradition that is the seedbed of European culture. The Italian masterpiece (though created by an artist of Flemish origin) is timeless and indestructible; it stands as an unquestionable, untouchable priceless heritage. In the case of the Fischer sculptures, this timeless artistic heritage is contrasted with the flames and slow death of a world that to a European mind, cannot be killed.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the sculptures are not set on fire but burn from the inside, and their death is visually quite beautiful. It is the death of a tradition induced from the inside that is terrible to see. Yet, there is much beauty in this death through the dripping of the wax and the slowly melting body parts. It is not only the *Sabine women* that is burning, but also the fellow artist along with his regular looking chair. Stingel, who is of the generation supposed to become eternal next (artists never die), is also slowly melting away. The majesty of the piece is also contradicted by the association of shaped candles as cheap artifacts.

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<sup>9</sup> Giambologna, *The rape of the Sabine women* (1583). Marble. Located in Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, Italy.

<sup>10</sup> *Playing darts with a Rembrandt* (2001) by Joseph L Sax evokes question on the untouchability of cultural products that are treated as almost divinely fetishistic objects by the culture industry. The value of these pieces is speculative but also common agreement. If this agreement is broken (e.g. someone does not acknowledge the almost priceless value of cultural objects such as a painting by Rembrandt) s/he is accused of vandalism.

This artwork cuts into our usual concepts regarding issues such as the eternal European heritage, the myth of Italy, the myth of the Renaissance and Baroque as the greatest and timeless creative epochs, the myth of the eternal artist, and so on. Furthermore, the exhibition space is a site in which the beholder is forced to confront and follow this death, smell it and feel it on their own skin. Although we, who are indebted to the European cultural tradition, would like to keep this death hidden as long as we can, as it would be a sad acknowledgement, we are forced to face up to it in one of the most prestigious art shows: the Venice Biennale. The event is in a sense a continuation of this heritage and the last drop of the myth that Italy is the centre of the art world. It is as if an actor who is suffering from cancer played his own death on stage in a play that was written about his own death. One can sense that by thinking of these paradoxes there is an 'arrest of thoughts' and for a moment we suddenly do not know what to think and how to think. We are part of the beautiful death of a tradition that is imposed upon us by the very people that created it.



Fig. 24. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* (2011)



Fig. 25. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* (2011), detail

One can of course provide a straightforward interpretation of the piece that remains on a representational level; it is easy to come up with a narrative for the work. This narrative can be moving, sad and so on, but it is still a narrative that springs from the interpretation of the work. Is there a way to go beyond it? Can this artwork become an agent, an entity in itself that points beyond representation and overthrows the social structure (in this case the art history) it was created for? Hardly. Fischer's piece stays within the confines of art and art history. One cannot let go of the narrative of the artwork, as if one did so, the work would become a purely aesthetical statement that is certainly beautiful, but does not go any deeper than that. In this sense, the work, until its very last moment, stays parasitical on its interpretation, namely on the discourse of art history and death of traditional Western culture.

The Fisher sculptures therefore create one particular kind of tear. However, I argue that art can go beyond this kind of 'cutting'. In the following paragraphs, I will compare the Fisher experience to another 2011 Venice Biennale installation. Taiwanese artist, Hsieh Chun-te, exhibited a photo series in the Taiwanese pavilion that made the observer spend far more time at the venue than one usually does when in a rush to 'see everything'.



Fig. 26. Hsieh Chun-te, *Raw- The tears of Danshuei river* (1987-2010)





Fig. 27. Hsieh Chun-te, *Raw, Priest* (1987-2010)

The exhibition *Raw* showcased twenty-one black and white photographs created in the course of twenty-four years. The show was accompanied by a performance entitled *Cooking theatre* in which the artist personally cooked for people. The performance included shamanic humming, trance dance, nudity, blood and food and there was also an invitation to a communal dinner and food offering.<sup>11</sup>

The images are contradictory because of numerous discrepancies. For instance, the distorted female body (fig. 26.) in the field can be seen either as erotic or as tortured, almost dead. The field can either represent a plantation (growth, life, softness, food) or can also be seen as a bed of nails (hard, torturous, mortal). The landscape can either be understood as painterly or as a snapshot from an old documentary of a wasteland. All this is the case, and yet it is not.

Because of the tension in the ambiguity, the image is highly disturbing and paradoxical, and it is a shock on the rational mind that looks for logical meaning. In other words, any interpretation we would hold onto is cancelled by opposing information, e.g. we see an erotic body, yet it is a raped lump of flesh. Or, the other way around, we see an abused creature yet she is posing theatrically in an (almost shameless) manner in the broken field. In the case of the image of the two men engaged in oral sex (fig. 27.) we are even

<sup>11</sup> For more information see: <http://www.essentaste.com/en/copertina/chun-te-raw/>.



further challenged. Is this really sex or submission? Why is there a beauty to this act that is supposed to be scandalous? Is this documentation, voyeurism or is this a set scene? Why do we get the feeling that we are witnessing some kind of religious communion or even fatherly care?

All these discrepancies are able to come together in these (contradictory) images and as a result of the tension in this synthesis, our usual, set ideas about desire, death, sex, politics, exploitation and so on are challenged. In other words, in the case of this series one can distance oneself from the narrative, as the images carry not one but probably too many narratives and interpretations. Put simply, our general, learnt behavior for finding meaning is questioned. Furthermore, unlike the Fischer piece, there is nothing to hold onto; there is a tear that emerges in our conceptual state of affairs<sup>12</sup> and the images call us to reconsider our attitude towards various phenomena, until this point, safely categorized. This is a different experience from the Fischer piece as there is no discourse, no framework into which we can box the image; the piece does not operate *within*, but works *outside* any conceptual structures we can think of.

One can always say that in the case of such art as the works of Hsieh Chun-te, it is easy to experience this state of loss because these images shock. However, it has been argued in the previous sub-chapter that shock does not necessarily lead to this particular state of complete introspection. Furthermore, if one considers, for instance, Ai Weiwei's *Study of perspective* (1995-2003),<sup>13</sup> the widely known series in which the artist shows his middle finger in front of buildings of political power, one can also experience shock. One can even say that the series works as a contradictory image (although very bluntly). But does the series take us any further than the political reference the artist wants to make? Chun-te's photographs reject representation and they refuse to partake in a particular discourse. They cut into our state of affairs, not simply within a particular segment of life (politics, art history), and not just on one level (e.g. cognitive or emotive). These images just cannot be pinned down, they escape 'a particular', steady interpretation. We just do not know. Or in other words: we stop knowing. And because of this not-being-able-to-grasp, just as with Ribera's *Bearded woman*, the works tear into how we are in the world and bring us to a real

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<sup>12</sup> By 'conceptual state of affairs' I mean the (inherited, learnt) framework, structure and attitude through which one relates to the world.

<sup>13</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Study of perspective* (1995-2003). Gelatin silver prints, 38.9 x 59 cm, MOMA Collection, NY, USA.

stopping through rupture. I have suggested above that contradictory images might be the gateway to rupture, but not every contradictory image, no matter how shocking, acts as rupture. Being contradictory is therefore a condition for rupture, but it does not explain rupture in its entirety. I propose to expand the research and look into other non-artistic practices and see if they can help articulate rupture.

#### **4.6 Trauma and rupture**

It has been argued that some artworks are able to evoke a tear or rift that is experienced as rupture, a complete incision in our state of consciousness. It has to be emphasized that the reason for looking for such art is the assumption that rupture might lead to 'ground zero' types of experience whose importance was elaborated in Chapter One. It was argued that the concept of the dialectical image might not be sufficient to pin down rupture, therefore there is a need to look elsewhere. I propose to look at another, non-artistic state, namely trauma, and see if the experience of trauma could be analogous with rupture.

It might seem strange that it is trauma that I bring into comparison. As the previous sub-chapter argued there needs to be contradiction for rupture to arise. It is not only art that is able to come up with a contradictory practice; in our everyday life we find practices that work as images. If we take our own frame of mind, through which we understand the world, as a statement, let us say, 'image A', there are bound to be practices that appear to attack that image, in the form of discordant statements. Let us call these practices 'image B', practices that are experienced as contradictory, conflicting or incongruous with our general frame of mind, with our 'image A'. If 'image B' is embraced, it creates a contradictory image in one's existence, as both 'image A' and the conflicting 'image B' are placed next to one another, and forced to coexist. Everybody can think of experiences from their life, when they were confronted with ideas, theories or experience that needed to be dealt with, but which they simply could not place into their frame of reference. These experiences vary from mild to brutal. I can think of experiences such as visiting India and seeing people bathing in the river Ganges while the remains of a burnt corpse floated passed them. Such sights shock the mind and one's worldview has to be reevaluated. More brutal examples could include being

fired from a job, going through a divorce, being in an accident, war and other forms of trauma. One is gravely or mildly shocked by the conflicting 'image B' statements being put next to one's 'image A'. The most extreme case generally associated with this kind of shock is trauma.

### Trauma

It is not my intention here to give an extensive analysis of trauma, nonetheless I will focus on how and in what way trauma might create a tear, and whether this kind of 'cut' is analogous with rupture by art.

Trauma usually arises when the person is not prepared, or cannot be prepared, to undergo a stressful experience. It is a state of shock, inflicted upon our conceptual state of affairs. It is too much to bear, too powerful to embrace, too strong or too contradictory to build into our frame of references. What is trauma and what might be seen as traumatic? Given that the term is not self-explanatory and various phenomena and psychological conditions can be paired with the concept, let me briefly peek into the theoretical background of the field. There is vast literature on the subject that acknowledges that trauma can and cannot be seen as a unified concept.<sup>14</sup> Some sources say that trauma is inherent to our lives. For instance, in his article 'Are we born into trauma?' (2011), Frederick Woolverton lists theorists who argue that trauma characterizes us from birth. Woolverton reaches back to Otto Rank who argues that human beings suffer trauma at birth. The perfect union we have with our mothers while inside the womb is torn apart by the violent act of being born. Rank echoes Freud and sees the roots of the earliest human anxiety in this separation. "The way the infant experiences this early separation from the mother, Rank wrote, becomes the foundation for all anxieties experienced later in the individual's life" (Woolverton 2011).

This idea is in line with the concept of psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, who argues that the infant is born into a state of confusion in which new impulses hit the infant as unbearable experiences. It depends on the mother to "contain" these early experiences and make them tolerable for the infant. If the mother is doing a good job, the infant learns to

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<sup>14</sup> Various therapeutic practices including the entire discipline of psychoanalysis can be seen as revolving around the concept of trauma from Freud until today. Trauma studies is also present in literature, film and fine art, notable authors are Paul de Man, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman among others.

exist with this initial shock of the birth trauma and unexpected outside experiences, and will not be haunted by them (Woolverton 2011).

These concepts state that trauma might basically follow us through life, and the job of psychoanalysis is to help the patient digest these traumatic situations. According to trauma experts mentioned above, given that we are born into families and we interact with one another, we constantly traumatize each other so trauma underlies the human condition.

When looking at theories of trauma chronologically, the first writings date back to before the First World War. Literature that specifically focuses on outstanding cases starts with Freud's treatment of women suffering from hysteria. He believed that there was a connection between symptoms of hysteria and the sexual exploitation his patients had to endure. After the First World War, the study of trauma became more urgent, when many soldiers, who although being diagnosed with shell-shock, showed psychological symptoms that could not have been only the result of the physical injury they had endured. Most practitioners could not understand why brave grown men would be shattered after such heroic events as war, so they reacted accordingly, namely by disgracing the patients. In England, it was W.H.R. Rivers who was the first doctor not to humiliate his clients but treat them with his "talking cure". Fortunately, after the Second World War, and especially after Vietnam, the medical world began to realize that victims of war, including soldiers coming home completely crippled emotionally, needed serious, special medical attention. It was not until 1980, though, that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became an officially acknowledged term and patients were treated accordingly. Nowadays, this diagnosis has also diversified, as professionals have discovered that different symptoms emerge after different types of trauma, so for instance rape cases need different treatment to those who have undergone organized political torture (Herman, 2003: 1-43).

Despite the obvious differences between birth trauma and the trauma of rape or torture, and the fact that individuals react differently to say a difficult upbringing, there is nevertheless a common thread running through all these types of trauma, and that is the *space of trauma*.

Eric Harper, psychoanalyst, who has done extensive work with tortured victims, homeless people and sex-workers describes this space as:

... a break in the social bond, in the symbolic world, limits the person's ability to absorb their experience into a symbolic framework, with the result that the person is haunted by unassailable images. The imposed images are indelible. The person has incorporated something alien that cannot be represented through his/her traditional frames of reference. The person is no longer human in the way he/she was before ...; homeless, alien to oneself - a foreign body, a remainder, not only resides inside them but also engulfs them.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, in the case of trauma there is a tear in the Symbolic, a term introduced by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, elaborated below; there is a foreign entity sitting in the body that cannot be fit into the usual frame of references we use to deal with the world. It is an unrepresentable entity that haunts and freezes whether we realize it or not. As the Wedemeyer film, *Muster*, analyzed in Chapter Three, so beautifully portrays, there is void, lack, non-existence with a tangible body. One cannot build up a Symbolic, as the Real (the wound, the trauma) is too present, and therefore cannot be articulated.<sup>16</sup> Trauma and related experience do not fit into the world as we know it; as Shoshana Felman writes: "The event ... occurs ... as what is not provided for by the conceptual framework we call 'History,' and as what in general, has no place in, and therefore cannot be assimilated by or integrated into, any existing cultural frame of reference" (1992:104).

As Felman implies, trauma takes place outside the frame of references in which we are taught to exist. One simply cannot grasp, cannot comprehend or internalize trauma. In trauma there is no space to imagine, there is not an Imaginary (again, Lacan), nor there is space to start fantasizing about a new life and new reality.

Having covered briefly what trauma might stand for, it is time to ask where and how the analogy with art takes place. Before I return to rupture, I have to note that generally art is not considered traumatic; on the contrary, it is looked upon as a tool of healing. The reason for this lies in the making of images, namely imagination. Being able to imagine might be key for getting out of trauma. Lilla Hárđi, medical director of the Cordelia Foundation for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, Hungary, argues that the sign of

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<sup>15</sup> Personal email conversation, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> The structure of the psyche that I am referring to here is the Lacan-ian concept of Real, Imaginary and Symbolic. This concept is explained later on in the chapter.

healing is when the patient starts to plan, to imagine a new life.<sup>17</sup> This 'being able to dream' is a way out of the Real, refining the Imaginary for the sake of constructing a new Symbolic reality. (See below the explanation of these terms).

The role and force of art in relation to trauma is usually associated not with traumatizing, or tearing apart, but with 'putting together', reconstructing and healing. Coming up with images, symbolization and visualization offer a way out of the unbearable experience of the Real. This is why art is special, since by creating images (to image-in), the Real is canalized into some form of representation, therefore can be contained again. Felman is thinking along the same lines, when she comments on *The Plague* by Camus who uses the symbol of the plague to deal with the Holocaust: "It is precisely because history as holocaust proceeds from a *failure to imagine*, that it takes an imaginative medium like the Plague to gain an insight into its historical reality, as well as into the attested historicity of its unimagability" (1992:105).

In other words, art helps one to construct an imaginary realm in which the void of the trauma can become a tangible body, although this reconstruction of the trauma is not as easy as it seems. Felman dedicates this special force generally to literature, and sees the making of these imaginary spaces as an important in preventing (the same) mistake being made (again): "Literature bears testimony not just to duplicate or to record events, but to make history available to the imaginative act whose historical unavailability has prompted, and made possible, a holocaust" (1992:108).

It is clear that to Felman art does not operate in the same way as trauma does: art can offer a way out of trauma through the imaginative act. Art is a way of being able to deal with trauma, bringing it back to the level of the bearable. Obviously, the kind of art Felman is referring to is not the art of rupture but the art of putting the shattered pieces together again. There is, of course, art that operates in this way. Nonetheless, the question relevant for this research remains the same: can the kind of art – not the kind that constructs and builds, but the kind that 'cuts through' – be seen as traumatic? Is the rupture described as an experience induced by the Ribera piece or by Chun-te images analogous with trauma?

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<sup>17</sup> Personal email correspondence, 2015, Budapest.

### Art as trauma

Some people believe that for art to make a real impact, it should be traumatic. In that case art is not about healing, helping to imagine and putting together the pieces that have fallen apart, but art that is about 'tearing into'. And, as suggested in the previous sub-chapter, the most extreme experience of shattering is trauma. The person who became infamous for mentioning art and trauma together was Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007). The venerable German composer's shocking remarks on the events of 9/11 outraged the world of art and culture. At a press conference for one of the music festivals in Hamburg just a few days after the tragedy, he called the attack "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos." Furthermore, he added: "Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for ten years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying; just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing" (Stockhausen quoted by Castle 2011).

At first sight, this quote reads as if Stockhausen envied and admired the terrorists for creating an act: an artwork no musician could ever dream of. Most people had this simplistic reading and judged the composer for glorifying terrorism. Later Stockhausen claimed to have been misunderstood, but refused to comment further on his remarks. The art world was shaken by his comments and as a consequence his daughter, a renowned pianist, rejected her father's name. Furthermore, after his commentary, Stockhausen's concerts were cancelled. However, there were people who were not so quick to judge, and started pondering on his remarks. For instance, Terry Castle (2011) professor of English, writes that the comments made him wonder if "there's something artlike or 'aesthetic' about 9/11"? He pondered whether Stockhausen's comments should be understood in the tradition of rebellious European avant-garde and the fascination with purity that is brought on by war, the general enthusiasm and expectation in artists that was seen before the First World War. Was Stockhausen mixing up life with art? After all, he was known for wanting to overcome the boundaries between the two (Castle 2011).

This is certainly a harsh statement, but one wonders what Stockhausen might have meant by these - certainly misplaced – words. If one takes his comments as a remark on art,

what might they stand for and do they have anything to do with rupture? In my opinion, one can read his comments as a call for art that really does have an impact on life. Furthermore, he wants to see art that, in a sense, stops life, brings it to a complete standstill. Does this stoppage explain rupture? To me, Stockhausen's understanding of stopping is devastation, not a space opening up for further potentials. It appears that Stockhausen saw good art as traumatic; in the end there is death, a full arrest of life. However, he did not take into consideration that new life cannot be born from trauma. Trauma is void, lack, pure presence without space for the new. There is no imagination in trauma, only the presence (of the trauma) that is there without a distance. In trauma there is no space to imagine, whereas rupture that is a complete erasure is expected to point towards an empty space of potentials, towards a new life. Looking at contemporary art, I think that although in trauma there is *presence without absence*, in art through rupture – as suggested by the Chun-te photographs - there is *absence* with very little presence. Trauma is a void; pure presence without space; trauma does not lead anywhere but freezes life. Contrary to this, in contemporary art, rupture, leading to 'ground zero', might be seen as a space of potentials from which indeed an Imaginary can spring. So the rupture of trauma is probably not analogous with the rupture of contemporary art. If rupture is not trauma, what is it then? If trauma erases, halts and freezes, what is it that rupture is able to do?

#### 4.7 The impact of rupture

Rupture in art, cutting through our conceptual state of affairs, creates space for the viewer to approach the world differently. What emerges as a consequence of rupture is "another way of cutting up the universe".<sup>18</sup> In Stockhausen's concept of art as trauma, this new glance at the things-of-the-world is not possible. Therefore, I turn elsewhere for other possible explanations, to Rancière, who might have the closest understanding of how rupture operates. When asking the question: 'what is it that the rupture of art is able to do?' Rancière argues that it creates "... a shift from a given sensible world to another sensible world that defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance. What occurs are processes of

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<sup>18</sup> As suggested by John Carey (2005), cited in Chapter One.



dissociations: a break in a relationship between sense and sense – between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt” (2011:75). Rupture in art, to Rancière is therefore not about erasure, devastation or trauma. Instead, it is a different articulation of the world: a “shift from a given sensible world to ... another”. According to Rancière, the force of art lies in this ability to reevaluate the frame of references we would use to relate to the world. The rupture that tears us apart, forces us to reconsider the thread of conventional understanding, of old routines that we take for granted. Rancière considers that art that works (in the sense it exercises rupture) is the one that redraws the boundaries of consensual lines of reality and reconfigures the field of consensus (2011). In other words, it pulls taken-for-granted frames of references apart and raises the possibility (not more than that, just the possibility) of a reconfigured subject-object relation. He believes the only thing art can do is to open up a space which might enable us to reshape the frames of experience (Rancière 2011).

Although I am quite sympathetic towards this idea, I maintain that Rancière stays on the ‘soft’ side. He argues that through art the world can be grasped differently and indeed, this is the case. However, he ignores the force of this act. As Carey says, this “cutting up” really might be a cut that is an action with a force. Rupture is a strong experience, a shattering indeed. Not devastating, like trauma, but there is a halt in one’s state of consciousness and this ‘cutting through’ weighs on the viewer.

There is a complete ‘cutting through’ but there is not destruction. What is the difference between the two? Let me illustrate through an analogy. In a debate, for instance, one can talk to someone in a way that brutally destroys that person’s ideas, so they are left feeling shattered and annulled. Or one can communicate in a way that although the person’s taken-for-granted structures are interrogated to the core, space is still given to them for thinking things *otherwise*.<sup>19</sup> One can sense the radical difference between the two. The former leads to the person feeling terrible and losing everything they had; the latter is also hard, yet opens up space for *being otherwise*. Rupture in contemporary art is a crucial act, a crack that opens up space for reconfiguration. It generates the possibility to imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

At this point, in order to show how radical this force might be, we need to move onto the next argument and introduce psychoanalysis. The space in contemporary art

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<sup>19</sup> As Ziarek would argue, see Ch. 2.

created by rupture is analogous with the realm that – in my reading - Lacan calls the Imaginary. It represents to the viewer the possibility to dream and imagine ways of being in the world differently, outside or beyond the frame of references they base their lives on. This is not a light and dreamy act, though, but a radical one, as it takes a lot for the seemingly imperturbable walls of the Symbolic to crumble. This can often be a painful experience. But the liberty we gain from getting the chance of no longer identifying with and thinking that our frame of references is set in stone, is a gift. So what is it exactly that breaks down, what is being torn into by contemporary art? I turn to psychoanalysis to explore Lacan's concept of the 'Real, Imaginary and Symbolic' in order to get a better understanding on the possible impact of rupture.

#### **4.8 Rupture on the Symbolic**

When confronting the rupture of contemporary art, the beholder might sense that there is a break in one's usual frame of reference. It might be a sensation of a minor shock during which all of a sudden there is a misrecognition, or perhaps even an experience of de-realization in which one does not understand what is going on. As one slowly follows the artwork and tries to reorient oneself, one becomes aware of a break in the signifying chain and of the false connections previously taken for granted. The exposure of false connections is usually anxiety-provoking, but one becomes aware that the taken-for-granted way one has previously linked signifiers and paired up concepts (as in the case of the Chun-te images), no longer works.

But what is it exactly that breaks? Where does this rupture take place? What is torn into? The inner 'site' where rupture acts can be understood as our mundane conceptual state of affairs through which we understand and structure the world. Jacques Lacan coined this realm as the 'Symbolic'. The Symbolic is a realm of personality (development) that ties into two other concepts, the Imaginary and Real. But before I elaborate upon these three concepts and the importance of understanding them from the viewpoint of the contemporary art experience, I will put them in a broader context. I will introduce Lacan's concept of the ego that he understands as the outcome of the Mirror-stage. One needs to understand these complex ideas, in order to grasp the Symbolic and the rifting nature of

contemporary art. Although these would call for a lengthy introduction, I present a short analysis through the understanding of Lacanian scholar, psychoanalyst Richard Klein, and psychoanalyst Eric Harper.<sup>20</sup>

What is the *ego* in Lacan's teaching? The ego is not the subject but it is an object, it is imagined and has an imaginary function (synthesis, the creation of the ideal, whole, closure and rapport). It is nothing but an imaginary structure that is assimilated into an image, not just any image, but one by which we are relentlessly captivated and captured. The essential attribute of an image that produces this effect lies in the anticipation of a unity which is the total body form that it provokes in the subject. The ego is formed through a narcissistic encounter with a mirror image of oneself that takes place in childhood. The mirror gives an image of completeness, a total body form that will take precedence over the fragmented body, providing the child with a primary identification. The child exists within this imaginary plane as an adaptive ego striving to reach an unattainable unity with the specular image. This narcissistic structure, made up of identifications supported by ideals, enables the ego to see itself as its own ideal image.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Lacan sees the ego as an object that is the result of fantasies triggered by the idea of wholeness, completeness. It comes to life through the mirror image, as what we see is a complete image that is supposed to represent us. The child finds the complete mirror image unified, and tries everything to adjust the fragmented inner world to this complete image. It is important to explain how this happens, as adults may go through the same thing after experiencing rupture. It is clear, then, that Lacan understands mirroring to be of crucial importance when setting up an analysis of the ego. Let me explain in more depth what takes place in the mirror-stage. The child is born out of the (m)other's desire for a want of being. The child is born from a lack and takes up a position of lacking, a want-to-be, that is the desire to pass from non-existence to existence - a logic of union. In this stage of the Real, the infant at the breast does not yet distinguish his ego from the external world. A moment arrives when the infant encounters its body through the mirror (and mirroring of the mother) and assumes this body image to be its own. It makes an imaginary identification

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Klein and Eric Harper are psychoanalysts currently working in London, UK. Klein is the founder of various psychoanalytical societies that follow the theories of Jacques Lacan. Harper is a (Lacan-ian) psychoanalyst. They are also close friends, and were kind enough to explain the complex theories of Lacan to me in personal discussions as well as through the exchange of various emails.

<sup>21</sup> As explained by Klein and Harper, email correspondence, 2014.

with this image but fails to realize that it is something external, that there is a gap which is concealed by the imaginary identification. As Amanda Loos (2002), in her summary of Lacan's ideas, argues: "This image in the mirror is the image of coherence – of what makes the world and our place as complete subjects in it make sense. It becomes a process of identification of internal self with that external image. The mirror stage thus represents the infant's first encounter with subjectivity, with spatial relations, with an external sense of coherence, and with a sense of 'I' and 'You'".

It is through the Mirror-stage that the infant starts a relationship with the outside world and also with itself. The child is no longer a non-self, a part of the complete immersion with the mother. This identification with the mirror-image brings with it delight. The encounter with a third term (the image) breaks the party; the duality of the mother-child. The establishment of the social bond occurs.<sup>22</sup>

It is at this stage that the Symbolic steps into play. On entering the public speech-circuit there is a semantic effect (production of meaning) on what is imaginary. This symbolic inscription, upon the imaginary trunk of the body, ties the subject's speech to identification. The symbolic is what designates the objective order and enables distinctions to be made between different images. The symbolic representation is made possible through the use of language. The Symbolic is a chain of signifiers, which must consist of at least two signifiers: Signifier 1 + Signifier 2. The linking of signifiers produces meaning and the meaning of any signifier is always in relation to another signifier. Language is structure and it is symbolic (Klein, Harper 2014).

This is how Lacan sees the development of the ego in childhood. The final stage is language, symbolization and being in the world through a chain of signifiers. It is important to understand this development, and especially its final stage, as it is here, at this realm, that rupture makes an impact. But I am running ahead of myself. Before I return to this realm, it is necessary to go more deeply into Lacan's concept of the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic, to get a clear understanding of the force of rupture.

Parallel to the Mirror-stage, Lacan outlines a theory of psyche and identifies three orders in which certain modes of subjectivity work. These three orders are the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, already mentioned. In my re-reading of Lacan, I argue that the *Real* is a space which the infant has settled into before the Mirror-stage, in other words,

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<sup>22</sup> As explained by Klein and Harper, email correspondence, 2014.

before he starts developing his relationship with the outside world. This is a stage of pre-representation, a pre-symbolic, filled with impulses that cannot be presented. In an adult personality – and through this analogy we can probably understand it better - it is a state in which words fail, in which there is too much to tell, which is too painful to represent, or the other way around, too ecstatic to talk about. It is a site of excess and not enough lack, there is no gap for desire. If one thinks of severe trauma such as an accident, death, torture, the trauma of World War Two or the lives of the girls in detention houses touched upon in the Wedemeyer film, one can grasp what this 'Real' stands for: it covers experience in which the self is not separated, but overwhelmed by the experience without being able to imagine or exist outside that experience.

When the infant starts to develop a relationship with the outside world, they develop a nexus with themselves and the mirror image. They possibly recognize themselves in the mirror and step into the state of the *Imaginary*. This is the state when the infant slowly recognizes its body, but at this point still does not know that there is a world out there. In a summary of Lacan's three realms, Loos (2002) explains that this stage is an intermittent, mediatory stage that is characterized by "the internalized image of ... ideal, whole, self and is situated around the notion of coherence rather than fragmentation. The imaginary can roughly be aligned with the formation of the ego which serves as the mediator between the internal and the external world."

In other words, the Imaginary is a state of fantasies and desires, created and intertwined both within the inner and outer world. Finally, the third stage, as I identify it, bearing in mind that Lacan does not see work with a notion of development or stages, but rather structural encounters, is the engagement with what Lacan identifies as *Symbolic*. It involves language, organizes the subject, creates the ability to abstract, makes the world and us exist in structure. In the Symbolic, there is 'meaning', 'interpretation', things have to 'make sense' and happen with a particular goal in mind for a specific order. Symbolic reality is the one that we create for ourselves and eventually believe that it really is our world, and we have no choice but live it. In other words, we create a particular life because we think that that is the life we have to live (e.g. become a mother, a banker, a strict father etc.) and we are convinced that this specific reality, ours, could not be otherwise. This reality is played by specific rules that all others who live with us have to (more or less) follow. Symbolic orders, when chosen together, create a society in which the idea of difference is usually

terrifying, because we cannot even believe that we could live this world “otherwise”. This Symbolic reality is so strong that we forget that we created it ourselves and that we could have created it differently.

All of this is important to consider, as every time we need to redefine how we relate to the world, we have to go through the same process again; in a sense we repeat the ego development through the Mirror-stage. The Real steps in, we start imagining, and we symbolize; in other words we make a new sense of the world. Starting from the Real that is made up of instincts and drives the human being creates a Symbolic reality through the Imaginary by constantly testing the possible options of constructing a Symbolic order. Whichever Symbolic reality, inspired by the Imaginary, works best is going to be called one’s (new) life.

Having said all this, one wonders just how contemporary art as rupture makes an impact. Rupture is expected to tear into the system outlined above. Using two examples I will explore where and how rupture interrupts our steady ego structure.

#### **4.9 The potentials of rupture in contemporary art**

Artworks such as the Chun-te images or *Uncle R* by Tinei might be seen as a rupture in the Symbolic. Our uncanny sensation comes because of discrepancies; a tension is embedded in contradictions that are not reconciled by the images. In the case of *Uncle R*, we see a painting stuck in between identities. *Uncle R* is neither an adolescent, nor a grown man, neither a victim nor a perpetrator, neither an agent nor a victim, neither a photograph, nor a traditional portrait. Is this painting a testimony? Much art and literature written after the Second World War can be seen as a testimony (see Felman). If it is, then what does it testify? Referring back to Felman, if the role of literature is to help us to imagine (e.g. create an Imaginary), what kind of Imaginary is being evoked by *Uncle R*?

It is precisely at this point where rupture lies. In the case of this painting, there is no Imaginary offered. Because of his ungraspable ambiguity, *Uncle R* points beyond the possible narratives one could put on the image. Although there might be a narrative, meaning the painting can be seen as representation, somehow one is always invited beyond

representation. The symbolization – unlike in Camus' *The Plague* or Raphael's *Madonna* – does not seem to be sufficient to grasp the image. Instead, the same void that emerges in the Wedemeyer film defines *Uncle R*. The *Real* in the case of this image is the not-knowing, not-being-able to grasp, no comprehension; instead we find ourselves in a stoppage: not-knowing, not-being-able to place, interrogation, and non-statements: and they wound the safely built structure of our Symbolic. Although no prescribed Imaginary is given, as there would be for the other two pieces mentioned in comparison, there is no destruction, as there would be in the case of trauma. It does not mean that the Imaginary is not going to work; it will, but there is no anticipation.

Why is the experience of rupture unique? It is suggested that the Imaginary works differently in the case of such contemporary art experience, but how? Let us revisit the Wedemeyer film for possible answers. The work ruptures my usual state of affairs on how I, for instance, have been thinking about the relationship of trauma and the Holocaust. The film, by confronting me with Real - in this case the unspeakable frustration of trauma – tears down the distance I used to have toward the Holocaust, and the boredom I experienced when I listened to endless recitations of the stories. (Being part of the generation that suffers from Holocaust fatigue, my usual way of coping with the Holocaust and its stories used to be burdened boredom.) Given that trauma cannot be told, it cannot be represented, I could not connect my personal experience of trauma with that of Holocaust survivors in general. The film, by cutting into my Symbolic (in my case my attitude of treating the Holocaust with reserved boredom), did not make me re-imagine the story of the terror. Instead, it made the void of the trauma tangible by *not* showing, by admittedly *not being able to* show. The film stayed in that space of impossibility for its entire eighty minutes, making the trauma of the Holocaust acutely present, universal and something I could relate to. This art experience, unlike other previously discussed Holocaust monuments, does *not tell me what* to think about the Holocaust or how to relate to survivors. It is precisely by not being told what and how to do that, that I, as observer, can let the void of the trauma in and start working with it, building up internal images, or in other words, imagining.

So after all, there is also an Imaginary in such art, however it is neither predefined, nor anticipated. Therefore, what actually takes place in art to create rupture, is not what takes place in trauma. In art, when the Real enters through the hole in the texture of the Symbolic, it generates numerous options (images) that can be the foundation of alternative

realities. However, it is unlike the Imaginary generated by art such as *The Plague* by Camus, the Raphael *Madonna* or the Fisher piece through where one is already told what to imagine. In the art of rupture the Imaginary is there, but it works differently, rather like a dream: one never knows what is coming next. Maybe, it is through this 'dreaming', as opposed to 'telling', in other words through rupture, that the 'ground zero' of art invites us to re-imagine the world we live in.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that in order to get a different, not prescribed, and personal grasp on matters such as the Holocaust, contemporary art through rupture can indeed open up a space of absence through which individual associations and personal connections can take place. Through rupture, and by not being told what to think, feel, imagine, through a tear in the personal Symbolic with the force of the Real (rupture), an empty, yet potential space opens. In this space the beholder is given a chance to relate to the things-of-the-world in yet unknown ways, and imagine an alternative.

The final chapter concentrates on the nature of this non-teleological change through which the beholder might be able to let the unexpected arrive, grasp the world and transform his or her attitude in ways that are free of predefined criteria and expectations.



## **Chapter 5 - Transitional space, transformational object**

The previous chapter discussed the concept of rupture as present in and particular to some contemporary art practices. It was argued that this force occurring in some artworks might open up the potential for ground zero experience to emerge. This final chapter aims to grasp the nature and the further potentials of this space of absence that I have titled as the 'transitional space of contemporary art'. The transitional space of contemporary art, as I see it, might take the viewer to an opening up of space for reconsidering how one is in the world. It is opened by rupture, defined by absence and can be seen as a transformative state.

### **5.1 Outline**

Given that many psychoanalysts understand the art experience as a transformational event, psychoanalytic theories on the art experience are elaborated upon. These practitioners see the root of the potentials of art appreciation in early childhood development. Donald W Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst, argues that the art experience is the continuation of the early childhood stage that he calls the 'transitional or potential space' of the infant. Follower Christopher Bollas adopts the concept of the 'transformational phase' and argues that the art experience is the reenactment of the relationship one would have with the constantly motivating mother. For Bollas, this is a state defined by the phenomenon of the 'unthought known', an existential state before (or beyond) representation. Their ideas as possible ways to grasp the art experience will be discussed in this chapter.

The reason why their ideas are important for this research is that they see art as the adult version of childhood transformation and therefore argue that art has the potential for changing our attitude towards life as we are living it today. Although it might seem that Winnicott and Bollas are saying the same thing, they are actually not. The distinction between their approach and its relevance when grasping what contemporary art can possibly do, are considered throughout the chapter. Both Winnicott and Bollas acknowledge

that not only art can function as an adult type of transitional/transformational space, but other practices such as psychotherapy can do a similar job. I present these practices in order to contrast them with the art experience.

Although various practices might induce transitional space, it is my contention that the particular nature of the transitional space of art lies in the fact that, unlike other practices, art operates with images. Because of their power, as articulated in Chapter Two, images can open up a space beyond representation, a space that can become the 'site of life'. This ability of art to reach beyond representation and function as a unique site of transitional space is juxtaposed by psychoanalyst James Hillman's take on the role of images. Within the category of images in general, I discuss how art in particular can function as a transitional object.

Further on, by narrowing down the phenomenon of art to contemporary art, I argue that contemporary art, especially those artistic practices that might lead to 'ground zero', produces/leads to an unusual kind of transitional space. These practices act so differently that their operation could better be grasped, not as Winnicott-ian transitional, but as Bollas-ian transformational objects. Through examples I explore where precisely their potential as transformational objects might lie.

## **5.2 The transitional space of the child**

The subsequent paragraphs introduce psychoanalytic theory on the transitional space of the child. This idea is important, as these professionals consider that the root of the art experience lies in childhood personality development. As the British psychoanalyst and paediatrician, DW Winnicott, argues, culture, including the arts, is the continuation of the transitional space of the child. He writes: "In order to study the play and then the cultural life of the individual one must study the fate of the potential space between any one baby and the ... motherfigure..." (1971:135).

Winnicott claims that in order to understand the artistic experience one needs to reach back to a phase of the mother-child relationship that he calls the 'transitional or potential space' of the child. In his book, *Playing and reality* (1971), he claims that the artistic experience of the adult can be seen as the continuation of the transitional space of early

childhood development. What is this space exactly? How can we find a way to the art experience?

Winnicott uses the term 'transitional space' in order to point to a phase of personality development that is an intermittent, in-between state of the infant who is united with the mother, but is willing to/forced to separate.<sup>1</sup> For Winnicott, transitional space – as an articulated phenomenon - takes place when the infant slowly recognizes that it is independent from the mother (roughly between 4-12 months) but s/he is still defined by the mother. It is a phase of separation that has not quite happened yet; the infant sees itself in relation to the mother, but already senses that s/he is independent from her. As Winnicott argues, transitional space and transitional phenomena are an "... intermediate area ... along with the use made of objects that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality" (1971:3).

In other words, Winnicott sees the transitional space as a state of in-between in which there is and there is not an independent, outside reality, clearly distinguished from the child. Prior to the transitional state, Winnicott believes that the infant initially exists in a "primary merged state" of unity with the mother ("no mother no child") (1971:152). The infant cannot see itself as a separate entity from the mother and experiences the mother as if she were under its magical control. At this point, the mother is a pure presence, while the infant is in an unintegrated state of pure being. The child exists in the being of the mother. However, the child suffocates from the mother's presence, a fullness which is too much to bear. What needs to be present is an absence of the mother's presence, put simply, the mother needs to be there as a shadow in the background. In order for the infant to realize his/her own personhood, Winnicott states that there needs to be a separation from the illusion of 'no child/no mother'. This separation comes about through the creation of an intermediate area between mother and child, between the other and the self. Inside the transitional space, the infant experiences the following: "... the baby has maximally intense experiences in the potential space between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between me-extensions and the not-me. This potential space is at the interplay

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<sup>1</sup> Although initially the concept was a psychoanalytic terminology, different theoretical branches have adopted it and it has been applied widely to areas of culture such as architecture and anthropology. Before I explore how this term is used in different theoretical fields, I outline the Winnicott-ian use of the concept.

between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control" (1971:135).

Formulated differently, the transitional space is the state in which the child experiences both realities: the self as an independent subject and the self as merged together with its surrounding. It is through the negotiation of the absence of the mother (the other: "object not me") that a potential space opens up. This potential space allows the infant to explore, test and play with a new experience of self.

In this (potential) transitional space the infant finds the not-me object, acknowledges that it represents the 'other', and weaves this object into his/her personal pattern. The object found, the thumb or the teddy bear, becomes a transitional object with a variety of attributes. The nature of the object is secondary, it can be a dummy, a teddy, a cloth etc., but nonetheless the object itself has immense importance for the child (Winnicott 1971).

The transitional space itself is a "neutral area" in which the infant with his/her transitional object coexist. In this space the question "*Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?*" does not need to be answered" (Winnicott 1971:9). The infant lives in this ever present reality with the transitional object that is loved, hated, used, abused and cared for. It is nothing but everything at the same time, it is also omnipotent, supernatural, but can be bullied and brutalized if necessary (fig. 28.). The transitional space is an immensely creative realm in which the boundaries of self and other, infant and mother, unconscious and conscious, fantasy and reality are fixed, and completely flexible at the same time.



Fig. 28. transitional object brutalized or destroyed

Although in a healthy personality development the transitional object loses its importance, and omnipotence is suddenly forgotten, Winnicott (1971:2) claims that the transitional realm does not disappear with the growth and maturity of the child. Furthermore, he adds that the same way we keep our conscious as well as unconscious self, we keep this third area within us that in adult life is going to be the place of practices such as art and religion. How does art operate as transitional space/object? Before I explain the connection between this space and the art experience, let me briefly present the ideas of another psychoanalyst, close to Winnicott, who also sees the root of the art experience in early childhood development. The theory is similar, yet the root of the art experience is detected at an earlier stage of personality development.

### **5.3 The transformational space of the child**

British psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas, is deeply engaged with the idea of the transitional. In his seminal work: *The shadow of the object: psychoanalysis of the unthought known* (1987) Bollas, a Winnicott-ian himself, introduces the concept of 'transformational object' when exploring personality development. He argues (1987:286):

I ... used this term – transformational object – to define the infant's experience of the first object. ... the infant experiences the mother as a process of alteration. She attends to him in a way that changes his external and inner worlds. Infants ... internalize the maternal process which is laden with logical paradigms that contribute to the laws of the child's character. As mother and child are engaged in countless transactions, these become facts of life that contribute to the logic of each person's existence.

Bollas sees the transformational object of the child – an object of most importance as it defines us for life - as none else but the mother (1987:13-30). Bollas sees the interaction of the infant and the mother as characterized by transformation. It is the mother, the first (discrete) object that fires this engine of search that first alters the infant's being in the world, as it is an object that demands, motivates, inspires and changes. The mother talks to

the infant, feeds it, turns it, carries it around, she is a constant stimulation and expectation of how the infant is supposed to be in the world. The mother, although she is called an object, is actually a process, an experience, identified with a constant alteration of self-experience (1987:13-30).

What then, to Bollas, is the transitional object? Bollas, too, argues that the 'transitional object' as outlined by Winnicott is a subsequent phase in personality development in which the mother-environment is displaced onto 'external' subjective-objects. The transitional object is the compensation of the trauma of the loss of the mother and it becomes the infant's first creative act outside the mother-environment. This is why the transitional object can be such a site of comfort (1987:15). However, Bollas sees the transitional object as a consequence of a prior process, namely transformation 'demanded' by a constantly motivating mother.

The transformational phase is of crucial importance to Bollas as it is in this state that he sees our basic unconscious motivations for how we conduct our lives. It is in this state that our 'package for life' manifests. He calls this phenomenon the 'unthought known'. The unthought-known is somatic knowledge that is there prior to thought manifest, and emerges in the transformational phase. How should we imagine this state? Bollas likens it to "modern dance where the dancer expresses the unthought-known through body knowledge" (1987:282). This is a state beyond the rational, even beyond the representational; a state of existential experience. It is shaped in the transformational phase by the reactions of the infant to the mother's actions. Infant and mother are in an operational and not representational relationship. Therefore, this is a somatic, in other words bodily bonding that is beyond thinking, beyond the Oedipal that is later defined by representation. Bollas (1987) argues that this state can be represented, and it is the role of the psychoanalyst to become the transformational object and help present the dynamism of the client's unthought known.

This theory is of utmost importance and will be revisited through specific contemporary art examples. For now, let it suffice to anticipate that some contemporary art practices also operate similarly, namely in a way that, as transformational objects, they let the unthought-known emerge. More about that later, for now let us leave childhood, and look into what might act as transitional space or transformational object for the adult. By

outlining of these practices we are getting closer to the artistic transitional/transformational space.

#### **5.4 Transitional space in adult life**

Winnicott argues that the transitional space, just like the space of the 'I' and the 'not-me', stays with us throughout life. There are extreme cases when the separation from the mother is not successful enough; in such situations the boundaries of reality might not be healthily negotiated and it might even lead to psychosis. However, even if the transitional phase of the child is successful, this potential space stays with us through adult life. Winnicott sees the root of art enjoyment, collecting, and other practices such as religious devotion, substance use (and abuse), rituals, the wearing of talismans or objects of protection as the manifestation of this transitional object/space for the grown-up. In extreme cases, fetishes that one is obsessively attached to or generate sexual excitement (rope, whip and so on) are the transitional object 'continued' in adult life (1971:4).

Bollas, like Winnicott, sees the transformational object in adult life, a deity who is going to save us, a new job, a holiday, a different partner, a new car and so on, as rooted in the transformative experience generated by the mother. The type of remembering of this early phase of ego-development is not a cognitive, but an existential experience and mostly unconscious, given that they feed from the 'unthought-known'. There are fantasies that if/when we get the bigger house, the other woman and so on, the "basic faults" of our existence will be corrected, and we shall 'arrive'; there will be a complete "ego-repair" (Bollas 1987:14-21).

The main difference between Winnicott and Bollas might be that, on the one hand, Winnicott detects some practices that are the continuation of the transitional state of the child and treats them as phenomena that are also present in our lives. On the other hand, Bollas considers that this state is responsible for something beyond manifestations such as wearing talismans, fetishes and other symptoms, namely for our basic inspiration and drives for living. He argues that our unconscious urge for a more complete life springs from this early stage of motherly motivation.

This is not to say that followers of Winnicott have not realized the immense importance of transitional or potential space. Transitional spaces are also recreated for the adult with the intention of changing our reality and the world around us, or at least our attitude towards it. To Winnicott-ians, psychotherapy is also often seen as a transitional space. As psychologist Bonnie Bright suggests: "Psychotherapy is one way in our current culture that we attempt to link the discrepancy between inner and outer, to create that transitional space required to allow each individual to feel safe and to play. Thus, in a clinical sense, we manage to attempt, at least, to recreate that much needed transitional realm which an infant requires for adequate ego-development" (Bright in Elliott (2002), 2010:4).

In this case, Bright argues that psychotherapeutic space is the reconstruction of the transitional space of the infant in which healing can take place. Bollas believes that, in analysis, it is the analyst who becomes the transformational object. He explains that many patients are waiting for the analyst to give them 'the solution', to remedy life, in the same way God is expected to save us. The analyst is offering a regressive space for the patient to "relieve infantile life in transference". In this case, the transformational mother is projected onto the analyst with a certainty that the object will deliver transformation and the ego-work will finally come to an end (1987:25, 27).

Where and how does art come in to all this? Although the transitional object itself is abandoned (or theatrically destroyed), according to Winnicott, we find repetitions and replacements of these objects, and one possible replacement is art appreciation. He sees artistic creativity and art appreciation as the transitional object continued in adult life. How does Winnicott see art as transitional space? Although an extensive analysis is given when I explore contemporary art in the light of this theory, let me present a simple analysis. Let us take any painting or graphic created after the First World War by the German Expressionist painter Otto Dix, such as the *Der Krieg/ The war* (1923-24)<sup>2</sup> series, for instance. The horrific and devastating images prove to be an easy surface of projection for any experience of loss, terror, war, suffering and so on. When looking at the work, the artworks as transitional object overcome the boundaries of me and not-me, they take the viewer to a third, intermittent zone that is between the artwork and the viewer. The beholder can therefore

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<sup>2</sup> Otto Dix, *Der Krieg* (1923-24). Portfolio of fifty etching, aquatint, and drypoints. Plate (each approx.): 22 x 23 cm; sheet (each approx.): 39.8 x 42.1 cm. MOMA, NY, USA.



revisit private experience that they might have in connection with the topic presented: personal issues of loss, horror, fear and so on can surface; and they can empathize with the work. The works are done with the clear intention of presenting these terrors. They ask the viewer to engage with the presented experience and leave with an altered frame of mind that is also anticipated by the work.

Although such engagement with art is acknowledged by Bollas, he believes the artistic experience, good or bad, comforting or uncanny, lies elsewhere (1987:4,14,15). Art is the reenactment and the continuation of the childhood *transformational* phase. The aesthetic experience is sought and engaged with the intention that it bring transformation. Bollas argues that art is particularly suited for this task as the experience can go deeper than the Oedipal (representational, verbal) phase. Given that art is not (simply) cognitive, it might draw us back to the phase prior to verbalization, before the clear distinction between me and not-me. One example of this is Tino Sehgal's work, *Kiss* (2002)<sup>3</sup>. This work evokes a very different experience from the drawings of Dix. The performative piece is a 'constructed situation' which draws the observer into a transitory reality through its physicality (darkness, slowness, physical closure of actor), and disrespect of distance. The work, as I saw it enacted at the art fair ARCO, Madrid, 2016, took place in a pitch-dark room. It was an orchestrated, slow motion performance of a nude couple, enacting various famous kisses from art history, such as *The Kiss* by Rodin or Klimt. It took time to adjust to the darkness and even then only the glowing white volume of the figures became visible. They curled, cuddled, moved in a way that seemed like endless slow motion, changing position, going from one posture to the other, kissing. While watching, I found myself in a timeless moment that was not defined by what I was seeing, it was rather characterized by a slow flow of organic whiteness in the dark, fragility and an almost sacred sensation that at the same time felt sensitive and ephemeral. When leaving the dark room, there was not much to 'tell', but there was such a contrast between this work and the rest of the 'art world' out there at the art fair, that I had to leave the venue, as the violent, buzzing, structured, money-oriented, object-focused art market felt like a violation of my senses. What was taking place in the dark room of the *Kiss* is difficult to put in words. I would say that what emerged was *unpresentable*, that is, beyond the verbal. It was a place outside structure, outside the world of money, gain or profit. It was even beyond the figurative, as the sight was most often organic abstraction.

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<sup>3</sup> Tino Sehgal, *Kiss* (2002). Constructed situation. Dimensions vary.

When Bollas describes the unthought-known, I think he is referring to experiences and realms like this one.

The difference between the two approaches to art appreciation is small, yet significant. As I see it, Winnicott understands art as a site onto which sensations can be projected, whereas Bollas sees it as a tool through which issues that cannot be described, can start emerging, the start of inner work. It appears that Bollas has a more dynamic, active and also more primary, non-representational understanding of art appreciation.

This is how art appreciation might be understood as transitional and transformational experience. However, the connection between art and these concepts is more complex, but more about this later. The previous paragraphs described two psychoanalytic concepts of early childhood development that these practitioners see as the core of the art experience. One can agree with these theories and see how, for instance, a teddy bear can become transitional object for the child and, consequentially, an artwork a site of projection. However, I need to explore *how* it is possible for images of art to function as transitional space or transformational object. The following sub-chapter therefore introduces James Hillman, a psychoanalyst, who sees images and art as potential sites for facilitating transformation.

### **5.5 Image as transitional space**

The transitional and the transformational space of the child have been outlined above, and it was argued that we recreate such spaces in our adult life. It was also suggested that the art experience can also be the continuation of such spaces. How is this possible though? How does art become a transitional or transformational object? And what kind of transitional phenomenon can it generate? Bright (2010) points out that art is capable of generating transitional space in which the individual can re-establish the broken framework of the self and develop a different relationship to the other. Images really are 'potential spaces'. Starting with a quote from Carl Jung, she argues: "'image is soul' and soul is the ultimate state of balance. When the imagination opens, new possibilities arise. Dialogue and interaction with images create narratives in which an individual can locate herself, can test options and integrate outcomes in relationship to the image" (Bright 2010:7).

In other words, Bright considers that in adults images work just like the transitional object operates for the child. Through images we can test various relationships with reality. How is this possible? Bright goes on to explain that “...the nonintrusive symbolic character of imagery is less likely to trigger defenses or resistance, allowing revelation to emerge.... A single image can symbolize or arouse an entire constellation of meanings, which can then be explored” (Hutchinson in Sheikh, 2003 cited by Bright 2010:8).

It appears that through images we can step into a space in which we can play, fantasize, *imagine* and generate new inner, outer and transitional realities. It seems that images can act as possible transitional objects because one cannot argue with them. How irresistible images are is exemplified by the theory of the psychotherapist, James Hillman. While referring to the healing power of the dream, Hillman leads us to the power of the image: “When I’m dreaming at night, I’m in the image” (1983:51). This might mean that while one is with the image, one does not distinguish between ‘I’ and ‘the image’, ‘I’ and ‘the other’. Instead, just like in the transitional space of the child, one becomes one with the image. Hillman believes the dream image is beyond understanding, unthought within the rational realm. He says: “These images make one realize that the patient, me, you, is only relatively real. The images are what really count, and they get so little place in our world, so my job is to let them speak and to speak with them” (1983:52). Hillman is speaking of a very similar kind of negotiation of reality that takes place in the transitional space. Images and I are “relatively real”, just like the ‘I’, the teddy and the outside world. He argues that one needs to develop an active relationship to the (dream) image. Instead of interpretation and distance, one needs to step back into one’s psyche. This domain of the psyche is, as I understand it, the Bollas-ian realm of the unthought known, a state of being that is yet waiting to be represented. Hillman therefore sees the path to the psyche as being through images, images that we *image-in*. As opposed to the rigorous quest for meaning – also particular to Freud-ian psychoanalysis - one needs to look for the imagination of life. In order to practice creative living “we don’t have to be artists but we can change the model, the fantasy we live by, so that we don’t have to imagine ourselves dull and sober and rational and critical, changing it into one that invites the puer in, and all his dangers too” (1983:62).

In other words, images of art trigger the Imaginary.<sup>4</sup> They can activate the Imaginary and they can also alter it. Once again, it is important because it is through the

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<sup>4</sup> just as it was presented in Chapter Four in the analysis on art and Lacan’s Imaginary.

Imaginary that we construct our Symbolic order, namely the kind of life we are living. To Hillman, images are a special tool towards our inner world, as they are neither discursive nor dualistic. They just evoke, present, ask us to look, but do not carry any value-judgment. Hillman says: “That’s what our dreams are doing and our memories: bringing us to respect ourselves – not *inspect* with guilt – to re-gard what happened yesterday, what happened in childhood and re-spect it. We look again what was forgotten and repressed, we even look again at the mechanisms of forgetting and repressing, and whatever we look at again we gain a new respect for – whether in ourselves or the culture” (1983:119).

According to Hillman, this act of mere looking, being with the image in relative reality activates repressed parts of the self and, just like in the transitional space of the child, how we are in the world might change. Along with the psychoanalysts presented, these ideas echo Freedberg, Mitchell and Gell and even Didi-Huberman who also encourage us to live with images, as opposed to trying to interpret them, as they are more than just representations. It is time to turn to the analysis of specific artworks and see how they can be grasped as agents of the transformational phenomenon.

## **5.6 Transitional and transformational space in art – from *Madonna* to *Muster***

To being with, let us turn to an example already introduced, the *Madonna* by Raphael and see how it can be understood from the viewpoint of the transformational phenomenon. Given that this chapter is based on the assumption that the space that contemporary art draws us into, is transitory, one can expect to be taken from one way of being in the world to another. Let us see if, as the psychoanalysts above suggest, art really is able to do this, and if so, then how.

### Madonna as transitional space



Fig. 29. Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506)

As explained in Chapter Two, the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506) by Raphael captivates the observer by its stillness, beauty, harmony and perfection. Given that we are looking at an image that is an artwork, the piece, by being able to reach beyond representation, might start acting as a transitional space. Similarly to the transitional space of the child, while we are looking at art, we are drawn into and merged with the artwork, but we also have a conscious knowledge that we are 'us' and what we are looking at is an artwork separate from us. There is a third reality that is evoked by the fusion of the 'I' and 'the artwork' which is the viewer's inner world guided and triggered by the artwork. It is a transitory zone by which borderlines blur and – as Hillman might argue – we shift within relative realities. The composition, colors, light and atmosphere create a space in which we can easily and comfortably unite with this work and enjoy the caressing silence of this blessed, yet playful moment. The piece invites us into a state of purity, motherly love, joy, a longing for a long-lost, a nostalgic fantasy in which we might have experienced such blessed communion with the things of the world. No wonder that the Renaissance with the portrayal of such states of mind became so popular; we feel that having looked at the image, we take some of its otherworldly peace away with us.

The work invites us to accept its clear statement, and we bathe in its graceful being, overcoming the ego-boundaries that would separate us from unification with the work. In this case, the piece works as transitional object in the Winnicott-ian sense. It is a site of

projection, and there are anticipated fantasies contained by the image that one is most likely going to entertain, a set of Imaginary associations one can indulge in and choose from while with the image. In any case, these fantasies can manifest as pre-articulated representations. There is the presence of motherly love, beauty, joy, peace and so on. This could evoke a variety of sensations, making the viewer sad, happy, calm, or nostalgic, but the viewer's Imaginary is given directions. In this sense, the piece can become transitional space, but could we call it a transformational object?

What is going on in contemporary art and in art that might point us to the kind of sensation of ground zero? If the *Madonna* works as a transitional space in which we can revisit our issues with peace, calm, salvation and gentle motherly love – a kind love that we were missing, for instance – then what does contemporary art do? It was suggested earlier that (pre)modern art might be seen as characterized by presence. Here it is suggested that when seen as transitional phenomenon, it can be understood as the Winnicott-ian transitional space. But what about contemporary artistic practices? Moreover, what happens in the case of artworks that create rupture, refusing to offer us presence but instead draw us into absence? In other words, how does transitional space work in the case of art that, instead of giving us a place, as the *Madonna* does, opens an empty space?

In the following paragraphs I will explore how contemporary art works on us when it acts as transitional space or transformational object. Using art to distinguish between the two concepts, I will attempt to show the nature of the transitional space of contemporary art.

#### Ai Weiwei and direct meaning

Let us take the Ai Weiwei's artwork, *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* (1995)<sup>5</sup>. The work carries rebellion, starts with the shock effect, and questions tradition and set values; this strategy is often used by contemporary art. In this performative work, Ai Weiwei took a piece of historical heritage, a Han dynasty vase, and theatrically dropped it on the floor so it shattered. The work is the documentation of this act and consists of three photographs

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<sup>5</sup> Representation of the act: *Dropping of a Han dynasty urn* (1995-2004). Signed and numbered 3/8 on the right hand panel gelatin silver print on Alu Dibond, in three parts each: 136 x 109cm. MOMA, NY, USA.

forming a triptych. In the first one, the artist is holding the vase, in the second he lets go and, in the third, we see the broken vase. This act of destruction is the artwork itself.

The images invite us to engage with them because, as Hillman explains, due their pictorial nature they are on the borderline of reality; they are as real and unreal as we are. They are representations, yet they take us beyond representation. The piece is obviously brave, scandalous and outrageous, creating an outcry not only in those who care for historical heritage, but also for any observer, given that the artist touches on a cultural taboo. It is not simply the inherent nature of the image that collapses the distance between the picture and the observer, it is also the contradictory nature and shock value that draws one into the piece. Once 'in' the work, what might possibly happen?

If the piece works for us as transitional phenomenon, it makes us interrogate and reevaluate our relationship with a pre-existing value system set by market and culture. It also makes us aware how socially conditioned we are to appreciate objects whose sole value might be that they are old. The piece might also be seen as a comment on the Chinese government and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) that shattered history and erased the beautiful cultural heritage of a nation that would have much to be proud of. In other words, the work directly comments on the following phenomena: it is openly critical of the social framework mentioned above; the western market of antiquity; museums and their strategy of making something into a valuable work of art; and/or the cultural strategy of the Chinese government. It might also comment on the role of the artist, that is, their role to unsettle, trigger, overcome or interrogate. Furthermore, it might also have a personal message to the viewer who would cry in pain when seeing the urn break, as the taboos we are all conditioned to live with are endangered. It is a powerful piece and it is a *direct* commentary with an open interrogative goal in mind. In its transitional space, the observer reconsiders all these set structures, rules and taboos, whether their own or practiced and maintained by society. When it comes to the role of the Imaginary in art, one is directed towards what to imagine. Although there is a tear, a cut into our usual frame of references, this 'cut' is not rupture, given that - no matter how interrogative - after the 'tear' we still find ourselves in a statement. The experience is direct and 'orchestrated'.

In what way is the experience similar to and different from the transitional space of the child? Is it the transitional or transformational object that should be used when understanding how the work operates when transitory? The piece evokes a state similar to

the transitional space of the child, in the sense that one knows and does not know that one is looking at an image: an object outside oneself. In this sense, the ego-boundaries are questioned. However, the experience is different from that of the child as it is without comfort. There is one crucial function of the transitional object of the child: it always offers security. In the transitional space of the child, the mother or the replacement of the mother (teddy) is always there. The main function of the teddy bear or any animated object is to provide safety, to create a holding environment (the extension of the breast), no matter how much it is hated or brutalized by the infant. This cannot be said of the Ai Weiwei piece. The work is certainly more secure than a real life experience, nonetheless, it does not leave us with feeling of being protected and cared for. This might be one of the particularities of many contemporary artistic practices, at least of those that do not strive for comfort, but rather for interrogation.

Can the work be seen as transitional space or transformational object? Given that there is an anticipated Imaginary and a statement, it might be seen closer to the Winnicottian concept, as the Imaginary is aimed in a specific direction with an anticipated representation (the rebellion against a specific structural hegemony) within a given socio-political discourse. In this sense, the work does not fully overcome hegemony (as in Ziarek's sense) as it still operates within a hegemonic framework.

Although the Ai Weiwei work is a direct and violent encounter that leaves us with specific ideas in mind and it can be called teleological, there are artworks that do not offer this path. As also discussed in previous chapters, there are pieces that are not teleological, and do not do not anticipate their own meaning (Rancière 2011). In the following subchapter, I will explore one of these artworks from the viewpoint of the transformational phenomenon.

#### Uncle R as transformational object

Let us revisit *Uncle R* in order to see where we stand in the transitional phenomenon dilemma. In the case of this painting, we know that we are looking at an artwork that portrays a young soldier smeared with blue paint (there is distance) but after a while there is a breaking through the gap generated by representation. The merging with the painting is a very different experience from what we find with Ai Weiwei's piece. It was



argued that the painting actively references art history as if it were part of a tradition, which indeed it is. Streams of associations such as humiliation, war, the past of our family, our political heritage and its impact on our lives emerge in a disorderly manner. Personal associations also surface, which in a sense one cannot avoid, and one brings oneself into the image, making it impossible to escape. Historical heritage in the form of active memories is also brought up that, consciously or not, still characterizes our lives today. The young man, who is a perpetrator yet also subjected to abuse, demands us to look deep into ourselves. How can one handle one's past and how does society do so? How to cope with guilt and with the fact that our very ancestors committed unspeakable crimes, crimes so severe that they cannot even be represented?

One cannot avoid personally relating to the work, but along with a private connection one has a hard time really pinning the piece down. *Uncle R* does not direct us toward 'a specific' set of ideas. It does not give us a specific thread of Imaginary as the Ai Weiwei piece would do. In the case of the *Dropping of the Han dynasty urn*, all possible routes that the artwork initiates can be described with the narrative of 'interrogation of set socio-political standards'. Does *Uncle R* belong to any such framework? By letting go of the immediacy of representation, *Uncle R* evokes in me, the beholder, an empty space through which I can reevaluate my relationship with the things of the world, and not simply with politics and history or art history. The artwork becomes part of me, initiating a negotiation, a reinterpretation of the inner 'other' (history, heritage, pain, violence, injustice, death and so on) in relationship with myself. Given that the painting does not enforce a particular narrative on me and points beyond what it represents, there is space for a multitude of new sensations and images to emerge.

Can the work be said to be a transitional object in the Winnicott-ian sense? Like the Ai Weiwei piece, *Uncle R* does not offer us security. The soldier stands there with his scrutinizing gaze and we cannot expect any comfort from it. Like the teddy in the transitional space of the child, it is there for us to (re)negotiate our relationship with 'the other', our bruised inner self that is also a socio-historical heritage as well as our personal story, but it does not offer the comfort of the teddy, it cannot be transformed into a protective object. One can grow to love it, to feel sorry for it, one can even be angry and frustrated *for* it, but it does not give us a safe space to embrace. It opens up a creative space but not a safe one.

So what is *Uncle R* and how does it operate as transformational? Both Ai Weiwei's piece and *Uncle R* offer what Rancière expects from contemporary art, namely that, instead of direct action and specific change, there could be a reconfiguration of the set of relationships in how we relate to the world. However, *Uncle R* does this in a way that it *does not anticipate its own meaning*, in other words, it does not direct us towards another narrative, even if that narrative is interrogation. We feel that *Uncle R* wants to tell us something, and most likely it is not going to be a testimony as it was the case in Camus' *The Plague* about the Second World War, discussed in Chapter Four. Neither is it going to be an interrogation of the injustices of a political regime that created a value system in which this soldier is a victim; a discourse that we see present in the case of Ai Weiwei. *Uncle R* is not even a person, it is rather a creature of collective and individual, conscious and unconscious, cognitive and emotional stream of memories. *Uncle R* is a site, but, unlike Raphael's *Madonna*, it does not operate as a site of projection in the conventional sense. Its unconventionality lies in the fact that we cannot know what it wants from us. It is a site of absence in which non-teleological associations about aggression, helplessness, being marked and bruised for life might take place.

Put simply, if *Uncle R* is to be seen as a transformational phenomenon, it might be closer to the Bollas-ian argument of the transformational object. There is stimulation, there is disturbance and interrogation, but one does not know where it is all going to lead. There is simply a tearing apart, a rupture is evoked by the piece and one may find oneself shattered but not told how to put the missing pieces together. There are floating associations that can or cannot become representations. There are sensations such as the uncanny, pain, disgust, sorrow and so on. When looking at the work we might or might not even know why we are feeling like this. *Uncle R* disturbs, triggers, unsettles, and that is where it leaves us. It does not stick to a particular social narrative. Even though the surface story of the piece might be connected to the Second World War, it is quickly overcome and there is not a particular object one can hold onto. The work can either be seen as a transitional space without the transitional object or can be understood as a transformational object in which 'objecthood' itself is 'deobjectified', as it is a process, a dynamic and motivating non-teleological space that might be associated with the transformational space outlined by Bollas.

The question that now needs answering is why does all this matter? It might be the case that *Uncle R* can be seen as a transformational object that evokes sensations and

drives, fantasies and associations in an unanticipated, disorderly manner. Why is it important to engage with art that can act as such? What potentials lie within contemporary art as a transformational object? This question is explored through the analysis of the third part of the Wedemeyer film *Muster*.

### Muster as a transformational object outside hegemony

In order to substantiate the argument about how some contemporary artworks can operate as non-teleological sites of transformation and what potentials lie in this space, I reintroduce the film *Muster* by Wedemeyer. This time I will concentrate on the third part of the movie in order to see just what kind of a transitional experience it generates and what potentials it carries for us, today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This part of the film is clearly talking to contemporary observers as it is placed in 1994, and centers around a contemporary narrative, a school-trip to Breitenau. Simplistic as it may sound, the experience is far from being a distant act of looking at history. First of all, 1994 is a date we can all remember well and the public who would be addressed by the piece probably has vivid, possibly grown-up memories from those times. So the film arrives in 'our times' and explores how we, as contemporary subjects, might be dealing with the issues already addressed by the previous parts, enacted in the past. For Breitenau, 1994 is a significant date as well: it was the year when the film *Bambule* by Ulrike Meinhof was first shown on TV, as until then the government had banned the showing of the film. The first scene in the Wedemeyer film takes place the day after the first public screening of *Bambule*. Although no real excuses were given for not showing the film prior to this date, it is most likely that the government was concerned about the rebellious and revelatory aspect of the film in shedding light on the controlling practices of the capitalist hegemony practiced in Germany after the Second World War. Therefore, 1994 can be seen as a date of revelation when the shadows of the past were finally exposed.

The 1994 part takes the evocation of the past by present experience as its subject-matter. It is from this subject-matter that I argue *Muster* is able to point beyond its own dilemma. First let me highlight a few scenes from the film and see what, on the level of subject-matter, they have to say. Then I will explore how what is shown actually takes the viewer beyond the narrative as well as conscious associations.

The present is always defined by the past, and whenever there is a moment of change or transformation, the past also becomes revaluated. How do these events and mechanisms of history impact our lives today? In the following, I present some scenes from the film that capture how the youth of today is influenced by this heritage. In the first scene, we find ourselves in a dark place that looks like a bar. A young man, the protagonist, maybe still an adolescent, not in very good shape and possibly drugged, opens the curtain to a screening room where some students and a teacher are watching *Bambule*.



Fig. 30. Still *Muster* (2012) from part 1994



Fig. 31. screenshot *Muster* (2012) from part 1994

The protagonist walks in, leans over the TV and the scenes burn onto his retina (fig. 30., fig. 31.). It really seems like a scene of madness in which the actor loses his sense of behavior – actually for the first time in this three part film. After all the insanity that has taken place in history, it is our generation, those who did not suffer directly, but rather from the hereditary consequences, who can allow themselves to go mad. But can they really? Madness would mean a rejection of the social norms, an existence outside the social bond defined by ‘health’. Is real madness possible in our times? The film does not show? any outrageous, out of the ordinary behavior after this boy's gesture. However, that would be expected, as we learn that *Bambule* means rebellion.

With the concept of revolt, the spectator is immediately drawn into the problems of our times. What does youth today have to do with rebellion? What is left for them to rebel against? The subject-matter of the film evokes complex associations. Does rebellion make any sense; does it have any point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? At the Breitenau site rebellion took place openly and had, in a straightforward manner, done so before. The site was a prison, a concentration camp and a detention home; all of them are places that openly represent power which people could rebel against. But what is youth today rebelling against? What is there in today's Western (European) society so impossible to live with, that it has to be rebelled against? Today's youth does not have an easy job. Even if objects of rebellion are found, it seems as if every form of revolt is hopeless, as no matter what is being done, one cannot escape the capitalist hegemony in which everybody is treated as a product and a producer. Is there space for revolt? Is there a way to break out *from somewhere to somewhere* else in a world that is completely intertwined with capitalist hegemony? Our ‘prison’ is created in a way that it becomes – at least for the majority of Europe and the US – the ‘happiest barrack’ in which imprisonment is considered the norm, and citizens do not even realize that life could be lived in any other way.

The film very subtly reminds us that there is no breaking out. In one of the scenes, the teacher orders all the students to go into a room that in the 1970s was where the girls were put for solitary confinement. He explains that the newcomers were locked away there for the first week in order to “break them in”. The dialogue between the teacher and the students is as follows: “Do you know what you want to do?” asks the teacher.

A girl, acted by the same actress who played Amélie answers: “Be an actress”.

The teacher, intending to be ironic, replies that wanting to be an artist was already enough for sending someone into solitary confinement, at a detention house like this. Then another boy says, when answering the question 'what do you want to do': "Che Guevara". "That's not an occupation" replies the teacher.

The protagonist boy interrupts violently: "At least we don't want to end up like you".

And the teacher retorts: "You'll never manage that!"

In other words, there is no way to break out of the system. The students come up with possible ways of thinking outside or critiquing the system; one is through art (actress), the other is through politics (Che Guevara). Although there is nothing wrong with the teacher, still, by the mere role he plays in society he becomes the object of rejection and disgust in the eyes of the students. They exclaim that although that do not know what they want to do, they definitely do not want to continue what the teacher is doing ("At least we don't want to end up like you"). The teacher's cynical answer ("You'll never manage that!") could stand as an assurance that the hegemonic system will also take care of you: there is no way for doing *otherwise*.

Although the entire being of these teenagers can be seen as an act of protest, one wonders if any action, any *being otherwise* could follow. The boy listens to music while the teacher talks. He wanders off, arrives late, obviously bored, and hates the entire situation. This hopelessness, frustration, yet boredom and ignorance that the protagonist carries throughout the third part recalls recent sociological research on the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'silent generation'. Hungarian sociologists such as Levente Székely (2013) liken the way people aged 15-29 born after 1985 behave in the same way as the youth between the two World Wars (1920-1940). That generation was called 'silent', as they were without motivation and lacked the energy to generate change. The 'silent generation, today are also passive and introverted, disillusioned by the structure, goal, and purpose of in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, ignorance of politics, mistrust of public structure and institutions, ranging from marriage to the government and, above all, a high level of conformism, are attitudes with which they live their lives. Székely (2013) explains that these people see change and the need to act as pointless. They do not believe in the power of change, that things can be done otherwise. Even when they talk about politics, they do so in a way that one would feel one was talking to someone in their 70s who has seen it all and no matter what could be done,

there is no point in doing it, as everything would stay the same anyway. The goals that were reached by the parents are no longer inviting as there is a general disillusionment from working hard towards obtaining happiness through higher standards of living. It is not to say that there is no frustration in these people, there is, however it is doubtful that it could lead to new alternatives ([http://www.hetek.hu/belfold/201309/itt\\_a\\_csendes\\_generacio](http://www.hetek.hu/belfold/201309/itt_a_csendes_generacio)).

The heritage of the 1970s rebellion therefore does not continue in the youth of today. What about the Holocaust? How does youth cope with the Holocaust today and how does that relate to rebellion? The inability to revolt might be seen as related to the Holocaust. People born after 1980 are said to be defined by holocaust fatigue. Holocaust fatigue comes with symptoms such as disinterestedness, burnout and an unwillingness to engage with the event. As lecturer, Simone Schweber, remarks in her article on holocaust fatigue: "As a friend of mine who teaches 9th grade history remarked recently, 'My kids are sick of it, sick of the Holocaust'" (2006:50).

Fatigue, often associated with boredom, might spring from two factors: one is the fact that the Holocaust was too traumatic and too painful to digest and therefore today is contextualized as a phenomenon that Schweber (2006) calls 'Holocaust-awe'. There is a silent, church-like sacralization of the Holocaust and this behavior prevents youth from getting closer to its actual weight and complexity. The other is the overrepresentation of the Holocaust in a way that either trivializes the phenomenon or reduces it to a mere narrative. Whatever the case, the Holocaust is not embraced; the trauma cannot be empathized with, and it is reduced to representation, events and numbers. Should there be a proper engagement with the subject, it would probably send youth 'off the wall', as was the case in the Shoshana Felman workshop that addressed Holocaust without distance. Felman explains that her workshop was so 'successful' in engaging students with the trauma that the group itself became acutely (re)traumatized (1992:1-57).

The third part of *Muster* therefore can also be understood in the light of Holocaust fatigue. The tangible tension and distress during the scenes that mainly come from the young male protagonist can be seen as clear symptoms. It is easier to reject, as engagement would be too much to bear. For these kids, given that they are German, this is especially difficult as there is the factor of guilt. It is also impossible to ignore that the forefathers were the perpetrators and the sins reincarnate. The extent to which this trauma and guilt is carried on is subtly exemplified in one of the scenes. Outside the building, while the teacher

introduces the site, the kids stand around him, leaning against the wall. While explaining, the teacher forms a pistol with his index finger and thumb and points at the kids around him. As an undertone to the scene we hear the band singing the lyrics “The murderers are living in every street” (fig. 32.).



Fig. 32. screenshot *Muster* (2012) from part 1994

The scene is subtle, so we do not know if this gesture is explicit or accidental. Nonetheless memories from the 1945 scene come back and the viewer remembers how, under different circumstances, this place was used as an execution site and in different political times the kids could have become the victims with the teacher their perpetrator. “The way the grandparents were traumatized is perpetuated over generations” is a key sentence we hear at 12min. 30sec. One could say that this phrase is a simple explanation of why the youth of today feels so miserable. If the film stopped here, it could be seen as a strong Holocaust film, but it would stay within those limitations, and could be placed in an interpretive framework. But the film continues.

The group visits the site in the garden where prisoners were shot and buried, then the music starts and we find ourselves in a psychedelic rock concert. The verses are in line with both the Holocaust and the depression of adolescence, yet take the hardships that



characterize both onto a universal level and point beyond them. The singer chants: “Waiting in this loneliness, is the king’s child, waiting for the end of torment. Fear of madness, fear of truth, fear of daring, fear of yourself, rigid, facing life’s agony which goes on forever”.

In other words, there is a universal agony that becomes probably the most obvious in situations of horror such as the Holocaust, but also surface in general during teenage years. This torment – just like the Holocaust – is unrepresentable. We hear the boy’s restless breathing while dancing (fig. 33.)



Fig. 33. screenshot *Muster* (2012) from part 1994

The viewer is left with the agitated respiration of the boy and senses his exhausted intention to get rid of his own misery. It is the misery of the ‘human condition’ that becomes especially tangible in politically pressing times and situations such as authoritarian regimes, Holocaust or detention homes.<sup>6</sup> This weight of the human condition that becomes tangible but is not defined by historical hardships sits on every single one of us and that is what the boy wants to shake off while dancing at the concert, ‘waiting for the end of torment’. This torment though is cannot presented. It comes joined to the breathing, it can be overcome by

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<sup>6</sup> I understand the term ‘human condition’ as a conscious awareness of the existential experience of being human. The realization of ‘being human’ can vary in experience from moments of objectless joy to acute depression.

it, but it comes with who we are, from the first breath to the last. Slowly the music dies away and only the stumping and the breathing are heard. The frustration, the pain that has been carried over to the present throughout history is clinging onto everyone. Is there a way to talk about this? Is there a way to represent Holocaust? Was there a way to represent imprisonment? Is there a way to show the condition that defines the youth of today in the 'production-prison'? Can the silent generation have a voice? Is there a way to tell how it really feels to carry the human condition further burdened by history? The stumping and the sound of breathing, the sweat on the boy's forehead, the body dancing in desperation, depression and anger: through means that are beyond the articulated, beyond representation, these drives that cannot take a form because they are beyond the representable come through in – as Bollas would say – “dance”, in the body and through its sounds. Similarly to Part One and Two of *Muster* in which trauma can emerge because there is absence (space) for the void and space is given for admitting the impossibility to express, impossibility also emerges in this part, too. This impossibility lies in not being able to engage, not being able to relate or voice issues outside hegemony. This part of *Muster* therefore can be seen as a transformational object in the sense that it draws the viewer into a space in which this frustration and impossibility arises outside of representation. This frustration is more than just a historical heritage that could be talked about; it is part of the human condition. There is simply the sound of claustrophobic, violent breathing through which one stays in the unrepresentable, in the unutterable within the unthought- known.

In the previous paragraphs I argued that the strength and importance of this film lies not only in its ability to evoke various associations regarding history, pain and the tragedy of the past (Holocaust, detention) and issues of the present (silent generation), but the film also works through us as transformational object by evoking the unrepresentable, the space beyond the Oedipal, a realm of drives that Bollas defines as the unthought-known. Let us look at the force of this work from the perspective of the entire chapter. One can see that the transitional nature of this work is very different from that of the *Madonna* image or the work by Ai Weiwei. The piece does not offer presence, a connection with something otherworldly, as with the *Madonna*. Neither does it aim to transmit a particular interrogative narrative (as with the Ai Weiwei) – whether a statement or interrogation. Instead, there is space opened up for something that is beyond representation. The work draws us into a

state of unuttered drives, frustration and void. It is a state prior to the rational, prior to verbalization, and can be seen as an urge but an urge towards what? The artwork operates as space, defined by drives that do not take shape but there is tangible frustration, the need to do something but not knowing what to do. This not-knowing, the silence and void surely cannot be experienced, therefore is empathized with through a statement, through something positive. The famous phrase of Adorno, namely that one cannot write poetry after Auschwitz seems to be the case. Or, to be precise, poetry can be written, but a very different kind of poetry is needed. What has happened and what is happening now cannot be fitted into our usual social frame of references. There is a need for poetry/art therefore, that takes a perspective outside this social framework we are bound by and taught to exist in. This is the essential nature of rupture and that of 'ground zero', namely a learning to live outside social hegemony, but not in a new, different kind of structure, but rather in a non-teleological space.

Using Lacan, the transformational space of *Muster* does not dictate an Imaginary that points towards and anticipated Symbolic as this non-teleological space is not prescriptive. There is deconstruction in this space, without any preconceptions and intentions to be in any form in the world. *Muster* as transformational object evokes the basic drives, that 'unthought known', evoked by our inability of trying to, yet not being able to neither live in, nor escape the hegemonic, capitalist 'utopia' we have built for ourselves, and which has become a nightmare. In this space, the Imaginary works as if one were in a dream space. Random associations float and we do not know yet what is going to come out when/if representations start emerging again. There is inner, psychological work taking place through *Muster* as transformational object but without the promise of 'healing' as there would be in psychotherapy. Still, staying with this space might be a unique experience as we have the chance to stay outside an enforced hegemony, taking the complexity of how we are in the world and going down to a state that can be experienced as 'ground zero', in which nothing remains and nothingness can emerge with all its potentials. This is a state of active work on an existential level that is not normative.

Why does all this matter for us now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for people that are concerned with the future of the planet? It becomes obvious from Mieke Bal's summary on Bollas' concept of the unthought-known that this realm evoked by art can never be a matter of the past, but is a space that is here for us now, in the present: "The concept of the

unthought-known refers to what the senses sense, of which one has a sense but which rational thought can only encircle, not translate into singular meaning. Such translation would be its death, for the work would cease to operate on the multiplicity of levels – rational and affective, theoretical and visual – that are required for it to continue to be *recognized by the present 'as one of its own concerns'...*" (2002:92, italics, DV).

In other words, it reveals the realization of the unthought-known, this deep realm of the self as a concern of today. It is a realm beyond the dualistic ego, beyond the Oedipal and the 'you' versus 'I'. One cannot know how to instruct or drive the unthought-known. Art in this sense is unlike therapy, in which no clues are given where and how to continue. The confrontation and revaluation of our personal unthought-known is truly a most valuable experience as it can reveal the drives behind our carefully constructed reality and can possibly make us view them differently. This is indeed a gift and a unique experience and I can hardly recall any other practices that personally drag the individual beyond hegemony in order to reconsider, in their entire physicality, how they are in the world.

## Epilogue

At the 2012 DOCUMENTA 13,<sup>1</sup> while marching proudly among the venues of the event as part of the critical art loving crowd hungry for experience, I stumbled upon a space that looked at first sight like a large garden-shed. The door was open, the arrow pointing to a dark space, indicating that visitors were welcome to enter, so I did. My self-assurance shattered as soon as I stepped in. I found myself in a pitch-dark, humid room, literally without being able to see anything. The total darkness was filled with buzzing and humming. I could sense that I was not alone, there were some bodies shifting next to mine. A most disturbing sensation. Where was I? What was going on? Soon I realized that many of us were in that space, bodies crawling all over the room, the humming got louder and the performers, while constantly in motion broke out in a dynamic concert that sounded like free jazz mixed with pop music but there were no instruments. My insecurity did not get any better though. I had no idea what was happening. All I could sense was that the whole situation was way beyond what I was comfortable with – being surrounded by invisible bodies in a cloud of sounds not knowing where they come from in a dark space where I completely lost directions. What was happening to me? I felt I wanted to disappear, just not be there, get lost, not wanting to know what was going on in that room or actually anywhere else in the world. I went through a complete and intense regression. But why? Why did I feel like an embarrassed infant? I was a self-conscious adult at an art venue after all. I had to admit that this experience was one of those moments one cannot prepare for; being fully overtaken by an art experience one is not able to ignore or contemplate with rational distance. How is it possible that an artwork could put me in a state in which I do not recognize my own behavior? This experience left me most curious about why and what can possibly happen to me through the force of contemporary art.

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<sup>1</sup> Documentas are contemporary art exhibitions and art events organized every five years in Kassel, Germany since 1955, initially created to reflect upon the avant-garde and bring the cultural life back to the place torn apart by the Second World War and by the Nazi regime.

The artwork that I am referring to – as I learnt later – was that of Tino Sehgal, entitled *This variation* (2012). The aim of this epilogue is to return to the gist of this research that underlies all previous chapters, namely to the importance of the *personal encounter*. It is done through the demonstration of the ability of contemporary art to capture the beholder at an (often unconscious and bodily) intimate, personal level. It is argued that through these deep connections with the artwork, no matter how uncomfortable, – it is possible to revisit of how one sees oneself in the world. This personal, rather than interpretive relationship with the artwork, is a prerequisite and a characteristic of the transitional space of contemporary art outlined throughout the book. Therefore, in some sense, through *This variation* this epilogue serves as a summary of what has been elaborated upon so far, in order to be able to grasp the entirety and potential of the transitional space of contemporary art. I take *This variation* as a case study. In the subsequent pages I will describe the work and its context, and this is followed by going beyond the cognitive, analytical realm to that of the experience. Subsequently, I aim to grasp the potentials of this experience by exploring it from the perspective of the characteristics of the transitional space of contemporary art. I will explore if and how the artwork has the ability to take one beyond representation, if/how it exercises its force of rupture along with its ability to open up a space of absence and work as some kind of transformational object. Having explored the art experience, I will summarize what the matters discussed bring us to. First I return to why it is most important to listen to and ‘theorize’ the personal experience. Then I will revisit and summarize how personal, theoretical and societal relevances merge and emerge within this unique contemporary art experience that might lead us to shape our reality and future differently, and enable us to imagine the world *otherwise*.



Fig. 34. Entrance to Tino Sehgal, *This variation* (2012)  
from the courtyard of the Huguenot house, Kassel, Germany

I encountered *This variation* that the artist calls ‘constructed situation’<sup>2</sup> at one of the busiest and most prestigious art forums today. First of all, the location for situating the performance had already made an impact on me and in a sense (could have) prepared me for the experience, so it is important to give a thorough description. The door for the Sehgal work (fig. 34.) opened from the courtyard of a unique place called the Huguenot House. The place is a complex historical heritage in the sense that it used to shelter Huguenots, a French Protestant sect who were persecuted by the Catholics and state, and forced to leave France to settle in more tolerant places. The building that had housed these ‘refugees’ was transformed into a community space of creativity and faith by Chicago based artist Theaster Gates in a project called *12 ballads for Huguenot House* (2012).<sup>3</sup> Gates’ crew created a fascinating site from the building, reconstructing parts and tearing down others, revealing the old structure. In his project Gates ‘went down to the basics’ by showing the old skeleton of the house that had served as temporary settlement during the 1600s for the rejected

<sup>2</sup> A term invented by Sehgal to indicate that his artworks are not performances, rather orchestrated sites into which the beholder might enter.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on his project you can visit:  
[http://theastergates.com/section/232115\\_12\\_Ballads\\_For\\_Huguenot\\_House.html](http://theastergates.com/section/232115_12_Ballads_For_Huguenot_House.html)  
<http://12balladsforhuguenothouse.tumblr.com/>.

'heretics' on the run. During the documenta<sup>13</sup>, the 'workers' – meaning Gates' team - lived in the house, did a lot of restoration, reconstructed furniture from the material they took out from different parts of the building, hid artworks in niches and invited African-American musicians to 'heal' the place through live performances and (Christian) faith.

It was after this experience of the physically altered building, that I found myself in the garden from which a pitch dark room opened. I walked in, not being able to see anything. I could sense that people were humming, there were noises that sounded like music but I could not make out if it was people making the sounds or if they were actually using instruments. There was very little movement initially. I thought that the insecurity would pass and I would get bored quickly but I wanted my eyes to adjust so I could find the way back to the entrance. Still, I stayed on as the music started to become louder and I noticed that there were bodies and people walking and moving around me. It took me quite sometime to figure out that I was actually standing in a large dark space with about thirty people around me. The hissing, humming, stumping and the singing got even louder, it was coming from all over the place, from floating bodies, the music turned smoother then stronger, gradually becoming loud and powerful, like a choir in motion. The bodies fluctuated in space, crawled on the floor, rubbed against the walls, encircling visitors, embracing the space and dancing way too close to me. I held tight to the friend I was with and I would not let go of her, praying not to be physically touched by any of the performers, their presence was too intense, and I felt that an actual physical touch might be way too intrusive. I saw that one of the performers did touch a woman and they were holding each other really tight. The performers finally broke out in a loud song of *Ain't got no money*, and although they stood meters from each other, musically it was perfect, so were the dances. Again they danced close to us, sang into my ear than swam off in darkness. Minutes went by in this intense musical darkness, then slowly it calmed down and the performers crawled back to the wall resting and continuing with the humming. This might have lasted for 35-40 minutes or so, then we had to get going.

Because of the intensity of the experience, I could not begin to think as an art historian about what I was undergoing.<sup>4</sup> Thoughts came much later, and along with them art

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<sup>4</sup> I use past tense in this chapter occasionally because *This variation* – as its title suggests – does not exist anymore. I am also refering to a past experience.



historical associations surfaced, however I quickly realized that they did not cover the experience I had encountered. Of course, it was important and interesting to find the connection between Sehgal and 20<sup>th</sup>-century participatory artist practices, and it was interesting to note how Sehgal is critical of capitalism and consumerism. It was also possible to see the work as an abstract painting, some kind of black canvas in which many things happened yet all remained beyond representation. Certainly, it is important to draw these analogies and know how and where Sehgal fits into art history. However, *This variation* could not be grasped through these theories. The work pointed beyond the cognitive analysis one uses for decoding, analyzing, grasping the artwork, and finding some explanation for one's vulnerability and child-like behavior. In such cases, analysis does not help, even when the observer already guesses that they are being subjected to a performance. In order to grasp such an artwork, we need to move away from analysis.

Why is that? It appears that the physical is for some reason beyond the cognitive. Let me explain this with an example. I am afraid of dogs and I cannot stand when they bark at me. When I walk down the street and see a dog in someone's garden, behind the fence, I notice that the dog is there and most likely it is going to run up to the fence and start barking. I am fully aware that it cannot hurt me, as it is separated by a fence. Yet, although I know all this very well, when all of a sudden the dog is there by the fence and starts barking and snarling – to the amusement of the people with me - I still get terrified. This suggests that these reactions are somehow beyond our rational control. Back to the Sehgal experience, Anne Midgette (2007) for the New York Times has summarized the reactions of a well-known curator at one of the Sehgal's constructed situations:

Yasmil Raymond, the curator of the Walker show, described a recent visit to the Biennial in Lyon, France, where she did not realize that a piece by Mr. Sehgal was on display. 'He had a Dan Flavin, a Larry Bell and a Dan Graham in the corner' she said. 'The minute I entered the space, the guard came in and started stripping. I slowly crawled behind the Dan Graham. I was so embarrassed I didn't know what to do with myself. I wanted to know the title of the piece, and I had to wait. At the end, when he takes off all this clothing, he says the title and then puts his clothes back on. It was called 'Selling Out.'

The state the curator was drawn into is easy to imagine. Similarly to the barking dog analogy, it is most likely that she was armed with all art history possible, and most probably she quickly realized that she was in the midst of a performance work. Yet, embarrassment overcame her, and she probably could not have imagined looking at the guard stripping naked as if it were art.

The irresistible physicality evokes emotional and instinctual responses that are outside of the domain of learnt behavior. Once 'caught' by the work, one cannot resist the experience because the conscious cognitive control has been tricked. Because of the extreme physicality of the work, one cannot resist involvement, or to put it differently, the shattering of the ego-boundaries is experienced in its intensity. This kind of involvement, as I see it, cannot be anything else, but personal. And indeed, there is no chance of resisting, or keeping a distance. One cannot simply interpret or look for meaning within a Tino Sehgal constructed situation; in other words a quest for meaning and theoretical references leaves one empty-handed.

And maybe this is precisely what Sehgal's intentions are, namely to make art that does not (simply) work on a rational, cognitive level. In his work in general and also in *This variation*, it is most obvious that art starts 'happening' to the beholder. By terms such as 'working' and 'happening' I refer back to the initial proposition of this book, namely to the fact that art should not be looked upon as merely a representation from which meaning can be deducted. Instead, art should be granted agency through which one welcomes the 'doings' of the work, no matter in which realm it aims to exercise its force on us, beholders.

If artworks are to be treated as entities that 'do' things to us, it is suggested that it is the experience that one should pay attention to. Furthermore, it is the personal experience and its inherent possibilities that become the object of study. In this case, the artwork is not treated as a dead object to be observed and dissected, but it is looked upon as something with which we, beholders of the present, can develop an intimate and active relationship. In this engagement, as Didi-Huberman suggests (2005), one should let art work on oneself as the coming together of subject (viewer) and object (artwork). This has been one of the underlying theoretical positions of this research, namely that it is the personal experience that is outside theory that should be paid attention to. Throughout the research and in this chapter, too, it is argued that it is the personal experience that is able to make a difference. Through the personal, art is able to have an impact on us as individuals and on

collectives in a way that will shape our future differently from how we now live on the planet. Thus the possibility of the meaningful personal encounter is of utmost importance.

How can art establish such meaningful meetings? It has been suggested that for such engagement to take place, the artwork has to overcome its own objecthood and draw the beholder beyond its representational attributes. In the case of paintings, this may not be easy as it is difficult to overcome the fact that we are looking at an object. In the case of a film – as shown through the Wedemeyer work – it might be easier, as the medium itself helps overcome the distance. With *This variation*, one is physically drawn into the situation.

Because of this extreme involvement and immersion with the artwork, the work can also be seen as a close-to-real life experience. The work erases the distance between art and life, as in that moment, art becomes one's life as lived, not a temporary pastime in a cultural institution. Given that art and real-life fuse, I suggest that the experience I discover while looking at the artwork might also become applicable for how I relate to life in general. Probably it is in this realm that art can actually reach real life and encourage us to relate to the world 'otherwise'. At least, these are Sehgal's claimed intentions, namely to evoke an altered attitude towards the world through targeting physical boundaries. For instance, Sehgal created a work for the 2013 Venice Biennale entitled *L'opera alla Biennale di Venezia* during which the actors were on their knees throughout the entire performance. It appears to be an insignificant detail, yet, as Sehgal explains, this – again physical – gesture was essential to the work.

I think the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of individualism and philosophies of solitude, and I hope that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can kind of adjust that a little bit... The 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much about the human as masters, especially in art... we control everything we can shape the world... we don't kneel anymore. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century maybe we can understand that we don't control everything. We and the stones are not so different. If you try at home and go on your knees you feel different. And I do not mean it in a religious sense. Just a simple act of going on your knees puts you in a different mindset (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUReasWFXmg>).

In spite of my discontent with his work in Venice,<sup>5</sup> Sehgal's comments are very telling. He wants to generate thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations in us through the *physicality* of the situation. What is this experience, really? How can it be grasped and what does it consist of? Furthermore, why is this experience important for the beholder and what does it have for us in the pressing times of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In the subsequent paragraphs I recapitulate various aspects of this experience, ranging from 'rupture' to the concept of the 'transformational object'.

What struck me in experiencing Sehgal's performative art was my inability to maintain a distance. I simply did not understand why I could not keep a distance. Adrian Searle (2012) in his review refers to the fact that not everybody found this work so powerful.<sup>6</sup> I also noticed that some people entered the space, leant against a wall, and started or continued chatting as if they were in a bar. They then left after five minutes, completely oblivious of the situation. Well, we all have our defense mechanisms, I guess. Nonetheless, if one did not initially resist the experience, there was probably no way of turning back. As some kind of rupture, the artwork pierces through one's cognitive control and defense mechanisms, shattering the ego-boundaries. This 'demand' of the artwork, this almost violent dragging of the beholder into themselves is something that I identify in the force of contemporary art as rupture. As explained in Chapter Four, this is not a shock that is imposed upon us by some scandalous artworks, like the *Study of perspective* by Ai Weiwei, for instance. In the case of such artworks, one is shocked within a particular framework, as one is, in a sense, directed and 'told' to be shocked and conducted towards how to change one's thinking about certain matters. This is what happens in the case of the Ai Weiwei work about symbols and constructions of power.

Unlike this kind of shock, the rupture of *This variation* arrives without any teleological implications, without any directions. By cutting through the cognitive control, in

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<sup>5</sup> Personally, I think that his piece in Venice was not nearly as successful as the one in Kassel. In Venice the performers looked like some distant lunatics sitting down and singing, looking very artsy. The profound effect of *This variations* was nowhere to be found.

<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising that some people decided to block out the experience. Although I have not seen such things, Adrian Searle in the Guardian tells us that people separated from such sensations in different ways. He writes: "I don't quite hear what comes next because two Spanish women have wandered in and are chatting as if they were taking an evening walk to a bar for a drink" (Searle 2012). Apparently the women stayed there for a while, kept on chatting to each other and walked out still talking loudly.

other words through the ego boundaries, one finds oneself in an extremely vulnerable position. What actually takes place is a rupture on the Lacan-ian Symbolic. The conscious control is eliminated and one finds oneself in the realm of the Real, in the world of bodily reactions, angst, desires and drives. What might be the reason behind this immersion? One of the factors is darkness, the audience/participants in the dark are already regressing into a vulnerable position. Also by being so physical, the closure, the sound and the living bodies in action generate all kinds of (infantile) reactions that are beyond the carefully built layers of behavior.

Does the medium help the force of rupture? I argue that due to the darkness, the sound and the motion of living bodies, the intensity of the experience increases. Darkness really comes as a surprise and becomes even more unexpected in the framework of a show (documenta) that is predominantly about *seeing*. In *This variation* there is nothing to see, only to hear and sense with one's body. There is nothing to visually hold onto, no artwork to grab and 'digest' with our usual art expert routine. If there were any object to look at, at least those would generate some kind of a point of reference, and the security of knowing that we are there to look at art. However, Sehgal does not grant us this means to escape and rescue ourselves by holding tight to a piece of visual information.

Aside from darkness, there is the sound factor that again is something one cannot avoid. Music climbs into one's ear and the information cannot be shut out. The disrespect towards physical boundaries also has a powerful effect as one instinctively reacts to being approached too close. So all these factors adding up, one starts to have gut-reactions in this situation that is way beyond the cognitive, art interpretive distance. By tearing into the Symbolic and arriving at the Real, what is it that one encounters? What is in this space? Is it full, yet empty like the space of trauma, a phenomenon mostly associated with the Real? Is it the world of the infant in which we return to the pre-verbal phase of our personality development? Probably it is neither of these, as firstly there was no trauma experienced, secondly the space of trauma is frozen and dead, and thirdly by being an adult one cannot return to the state of a six-month-old infant. This space might rather resemble the type of experience the psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas, refers to as that of psychoanalysis, namely a space of the *adult* (and not the infant) in regression. This is no longer the space of the child – there is no return to states that one has already passed – but a current state that is characterized by parts of our personality that do not disappear with time, but as dynamisms

define how we might be in the world. My reactions to this work surprised me the most, as they were in direct collision with the ego of the confident art expert. I felt as if I had descended to the uncontrollable, to the inexpressible, or to the unrepresentable, to a realm that Bollas defines as the unthought-known.

I felt stupid, lost and useless while I was stumbling around in the dark. I was also anxious because of not knowing what kind of space I had been thrown into. The security of the idea that I was in an art venue made me feel a bit safer – nothing lethal can happen in an art space after all. I was also aware that the uncertainty that I felt was nonsensical. My physical reaction was quicker than my realizing that I was frightened; I immediately pulled myself closer to my friend. I started giggling and making strange scream-like sounds when the performers walked too close to me, holding my hand out in front of me so no one could approach too close. There was a woman who was hugged by one of the performers and she provoked strange fantasies in me. I was repulsed; it felt as if the man was using the power of the situation to seduce someone completely unknown to him. It felt like I was witnessing a scene in which the woman had no say; she was vulnerable and being subjected to the man. I also had fantasies of her possibly enjoying this situation, and in that case it felt as if I was witnessing a secret get-together where in the dark room it is all right to do anything: whatever happens does not belong to real life after all; this space is an empty space in which one can let go of constraints and physically live one's fantasies. It was most surprising how bodily aware and infantile I had become all of a sudden. How sexual the entire experience was and how embarrassed this hidden sexuality in the dark made me – like a child who is not supposed to see what s/he has found. How uncanny and intruded I felt by this 'adult world', that is for those whose life is about sexuality, politics, entertainment and relationships. My gut-reaction was to retreat to the infantile position of holding onto someone for protection. As one can tell, these are realms of one's personality one is not very happy to revisit or confront. Nonetheless, in such situations, one does not have a choice.

Why is it important that one confronts his or her unthought-known? From the viewpoint of this research, in what way might this experience be transformative? Maybe the irresistibility is the real gift of such experiences, namely that one cannot hide behind defense mechanisms and the grip of the ego. It is not by accident that Bollas defines the world of the unthought-known as transformative, defined by the transformational object. In

psychoanalysis, he identifies this object initially with the mother. In adulthood, it is the transformational object in various forms that – as a motivating object - can open space for one to revisit those hidden, yet very much present drives, urges, anxieties that obviously define how we are in the world. *This variation*, as transformational object, disturbs and interrogates. With one cut, it tears through the beholder's conceptual state of affairs. There is no narrative to hold onto, one is not told what to feel or how to think of the world. In this sense, the experience is very different from any art with an intentional narrative, whether Renaissance artworks or contemporary art. This is a 'de-objectified' experience, as there is no object to cling onto. In this non-teleological space, the complexity of one's being emerges without constraints. By its non-directional nature, one is not forced to think, feel or exist in any way that might be indicated as 'right', 'true' or 'important' by any hegemony. In other words, this is a realm outside the social order, beyond the representation-based world-view that operates according to a given value-system in which everything is categorized as dualistic by nature. Instead, in this world, associations, both pleasant and uncanny, arrive like dream-images, in a disorderly manner, floating as associations without value-judgment or hierarchy. One is invited by this opening of potential spaces beyond the imposed hegemony to experience being outside the grip of the socially conditioned ego.

The reason why such space can open is because artworks like *This variation* do not impose any meaning, or, as Jacques Rancière (2011) argues 'they do not anticipate their own meaning'. In previous chapters, I referred to an aspect of such art experiences with the term 'absence'. As opposed to enforcing a particular presence onto us, these artworks open up space. In the following paragraphs this ability of *This variation* is explored.

Given that in the floating, dynamic experience of *This variation* there is nothing to hold onto, the ego cannot identify possible representative elements in which it can call the mind for help; one is sentenced to go deeper and deeper in oneself. There are certainly identifiable bits such as the songs that refer to money and capitalism, but they swim into one's state of consciousness just as daily reality is built into one's dreams. This evocation of the unthought-known is possible because the artwork does not invade the beholder with its presence. As suggested in Chapter Three, presence and being present is often the reason for seeking the art experience. In many cases, artworks do fulfill this expectation, namely that once the viewer engages with them they drift into a particular state of consciousness,

anticipated by the artwork that is 'other than' their current conceptual state of affairs. Through empathy one engages with artworks and experiences beauty, calmness, divinity or horror, disgust, sadness and so on. No matter whether most (pre)modern art is grasped from a representationalist or agency-type of art historical approach, most works carry a particular presence, a tangible being that one can either enframe into analysis and/or relate to and embrace as a complex phenomenon. However, some contemporary artworks operate differently, namely in a way that they do not anticipate their own meaning. Instead, by *not-telling*, by inviting the viewer beyond representation they open up a space for questions, for a flow of associations in a disorderly manner and – most importantly – for personal engagement. In the case of *This variation* the artwork becomes something other than a criticism of capitalism and a revolt against the objectification of art. In *This variation* there is not even a detectable surface narrative beyond which the viewer could be invited, or that the viewer is called to overcome (as is the case with the much discussed Wedemeyer film, *Muster*). In this work, there is merely 'nothing'. As opposed to presence, there are lack, drifts, shifts and constant motion. Here, the ego desperately looks for things to hold onto, nonetheless it is left empty-handed. This constant confrontation of 'trying, but not being able to' hold onto anything creates the desperation and it is this empty space, in other words, the lack of fixed points that draws the beholder into the unthought-known.

What remains to return to is the significance of this experience; why it is important to fall apart and confront that we would otherwise not want to see. Furthermore, if we accept that art really is unique in this sense, namely it can open up space that is a gateway to a different attitude towards the world, how should art be treated in times that call for urgent change?



Having discussed *This variation* as personal experience, it is time to return to the initial dilemma of the book, namely the potential of contemporary art to generate change in the course of events that currently define our world. Time is ticking and there is urgency for action. Yet, it might be precisely in these pressing times that there is a need to adopt a different mentality, as stated by some of the philosophers I referred to earlier in the book. It appears that the kind of 'doing' that humankind has used for finding solutions for situations of urgency is not going to work anymore. Why can we no longer believe in the



great achievements of science and technology? Why should we be skeptical towards the invention of new methods, models and technological devices for saving the planet or at least slowing down the devastating processes that obviously manifest in disasters? Although my argument for these questions has been presented already, in order to see the entire picture I feel there is a need for a final recap.

Firstly, it seems like the outcomes that the problem-solution, cause-effect type of attitude would generate are stuck within the framework of the much discussed hegemony. It is this very attitude, dictated by hegemony that has gotten us into these troubles. How can one expect to find a solution within the very framework that is responsible for the current state of things? Secondly, if a lifestyle that slowed down the course of events were enforced upon the world population, the tension that would arise from such radical change would result in the outbreak of massive aggression and violence. Put simply, even if all governments acknowledged that humankind is destroying the planet and there is a need for radical action now, not tomorrow, but now, they could not afford to ban the use of motorized transportation, order the closing down of all factories, prohibit eating beef and ordering citizens to grow vegetables on their rooftops. What needs to change is the individual and therefore, consequently, the collective attitude towards the 'things-of-the-world'. There is a need to slip out of the grip of the dualistic ego that thinks of its life in its body as the most important, wants the most and best for itself in as short a time as possible. It is essential to overcome the utilitarian, self-centered approach that looks at gain and profit for the individual as the key to well-being, no matter what price there is to pay. It is time to master a new behavior. We do not really have any other choice, as we can only think of a solution for the current ills of the world if we change, individually and collectively, our attitude towards life itself. This change is not going to be implemented by us deciding on it and saying that 'from next week I will have a different approach to the world and towards life'.

This change in us, individuals personally, can arise if we can look at ourselves and the world outside the confines of hegemony. It is only possible if we, human beings, realize that we live in a constructed reality that we have built and have the possibility, the energy and the right to change. A new paradigm can emerge if we realize that the structures we take for granted are no more than constructions of power that, even if we experience them as set in stone, are actually illusory. They exist because it is our consciousness, and

consequentially intentions and acts, that keep them alive. As soon as one experiences the things-of-the-world beyond these structures, as soon as one discovers that these frameworks are completely fictive and man-made, and are the product of the always craving ego, there is a way to change.

Consequentially, engagement with practices that are beyond hegemony should be encouraged. The reason why some contemporary artworks are unique in this sense lies their ability to bring the beholder completely, not simply on a cognitive level, beyond hegemony, in general, and beyond the power structure of their own ego, in particular. When it comes to writing about art, if artworks such as the ones cited are able to draw one into such potential space, it is this ability and space that should be theorized. In the case of the transitional space of contemporary art, as we have seen, the representationalist interpretive framework, which has become most common for thinking about art falls short and leaves both beholder and theorist empty-handed. In the case of the contemporary artworks I was working with, it is obvious that the art experience is simply in a different realm from interpretive, analytical theory. In any case, art should not be looked upon as a dead object waiting to be dissected on an operating table; in other words it should not be treated as representation within which meaning can be found, reducing the artwork to the status of a messenger. Although the representationalist attitude has its own relevance and importance, if we want to do justice to the kind of art that is able to draw us into this transitional space, art history should leave interpretive theory and look at art as a respected agent, capable of inviting the beholder into their own personal ground zero in order to revisit how they are in the world. Instead of finding out what it means, this ability of art to invite the beholder beyond the structured ego-boundaries and ‘feel the things-of-the-world on its own skin’ should be – and hopefully was in this research - theorized.

I would like to emphasize again that although interpretive theory is important as it generates knowledge, the mastering of factual knowledge of the past (or present) might not be of primary importance, as in order to address the urgent matters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is more important to experience a way of being in the world that is outside hegemony. Therefore, the emphasis should be on *personal experience* rather than on *general knowledge*. This is what I have been aiming to do throughout this book, through my own, personal language, through ‘this art history’, my ‘art speak’, articulate the importance of *my*

*personal* experience. What has been *experienced* has now been *theorized* in an other-than-representationalist framework. The kind of theory I have been expounding might sound different from general art history; at times it is very personal, it does not come to conclusions, it does not have findings, it is often subjective, emotional and poetic. It is experience put into theory in the form of what Mieke Bal calls 'approximate translation'. Nonetheless, I suggest that this kind of art writing does justice to the artworks explored.

How does this other-than-representational attitude towards art impact the status of art in society? If we accept that some artworks fulfill this most important position in today's world, their status should also be reconsidered. As suggested in Chapter One, art is usually not included when important decisions are made about the future of the planet. Relying on what has been explored, I argue that art should be involved at least at a preparatory level in decision-making, precisely because of its ability to draw the beholder into a transitional space. I am aware that the utilitarian arguments for the 'use' and 'benefit' of art for the wellbeing of society have become weak, apologetic and outdated. This I can understand; furthermore, as I see it, these arguments keep the arts within hegemony. However, if one looks at art as a force that can open up space for the unknown in one's entire being, in a world that does not have other choice but to reinvent itself in the form of not yet seen alternatives, it would be thoughtless and ignorant to exclude such artistic practices as being simply a luxury pastime, irrelevant or unimportant.

At the end of this book I have come to the conclusion that contemporary art experiences are worth considering as key agents for shaping our attitude towards the future of the world. Practices, such as the work of Tinei, Wedemeyer and most obviously Sehgal, are means through which the firmly set ego-boundaries can crumble and the beholder can actually exist in a space where the rules of the hegemonic game no longer apply. Spending time, just merely *existing beyond* the conceptual state of affairs we take for granted when mapping and ordering the things-of-the-world, by touching 'ground zero' with one's body, heart and mind, with one's entire being, is something that contemporary art might help us with. In this art engagement, we might be able to experience how to 'imagine otherwise'.

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## Summary

This book addresses the possible impact of contemporary art on the world's present and future. It is obvious that we cannot continue living on this planet as we are doing right now, because humanity is running into its own extinction. I argue that the way to change the course of events around cannot come from a usual, dualistic problem-solution framework. In the book, I propose that some contemporary art can show us, people, how to be in the world in an other-than-ego-driven manner.

Consequentially, the departing questions for the research are as follows: Can contemporary art be this significant? Is this not asking too much from contemporary art? Let us suppose that contemporary art can have such significance, but in that case *how* is contemporary art able to do this?

The research springs from two intertwined, yet distinctive urges that define the discourse of the book. On the one hand, I have deep, personal, transformative experiences when encountering some contemporary art; therefore this is the empirical foundation of the research. It is proposed that some art experiences can be so powerful that the ego-boundaries shatter while in the artwork. It is in this space, beyond the control of the ego that the force of art can reveal itself. On the other hand, there is the urge of a deep concern about the fate of humanity on the planet. The two meet in the book and it is suggested that the force of contemporary art can help us address and become active agents in shaping how humanity conducts its present and future.

The arguments expounded in this book therefore do not originate from a theoretical position, but from personal experiences and concerns. Personal experiences become the groundwork for theory that contextualizes this particular force of art. In the research, personal experience is theorized, and it is suggested that this kind of personal encounter can emerge in any sensitive beholder.

In other words, it is proposed that if we *let art work on us*, beholders, it is quite possible to get into such transformative space. Therefore, the theoretical field where I position this research is a field in art history that, as opposed to treating art as a passive

object, it comprehends *art as work* or as *agency*. According to thinkers such as Mieke Bal, Alfred Gell, Georges Didi-Hubermann, WJT Mitchell, as opposed to looking at the artwork as evidence or a ground for interpretation, I propose to look at art as an entity, an agent in itself, and see *what art wants from* the beholder.

The field of art as agency is narrowed down by the fact that my interest is about contemporary art. What kind of agency can contemporary art have? Moreover, where does this meet with the need to find a cure for the ills of the planet? Interestingly, while engulfed in the art experience, one senses a different attitude towards the things-of-the-world. As one's ego-boundaries are interrogated by the art experience, one realizes that there is life beyond the current ego-structure – a profit-gain-ego centred attitude based on dualism and separation – we are living with. In this experience, along with the erasure of the distance between artwork and beholder, the separation between the human being and the matters of the world is also altered.

What is this space where such drastic reconsiderations (cognitive, emotional and even physical) of how we are in the world can take place? The theoretical foundation of this argumentation is New Materialism, Eco Criticism and Slow Science. Although their ideas about acting in the world in other ways than hegemonic vary greatly, there is a concept in their theories that I find recurring and that is the need for the making of empty, non-teleological spaces from which yet unknown alternatives for being in the world might surface. French philosopher Catherine Malabou calls such initiatives 'zero points', empty spaces of nothingness with all potentials. For her, 'zero point' is a point of force before form, the potential of pure matter without the imposition of any order from above. According to Malabou, new, non-teleological attitude towards the things of the world can spring from points as such, given that these are spaces that are not driven by hegemony responsible for the destruction of the planet. It is this potential of 'zero point' that emerges in contemporary art in very particular ways, therefore I adopt this term with alterations and call it 'ground zero'.

Ground zero is a space of force. Much contemporary art theory does not associate this space with the force of art, yet, I think it is crucial for the current discourse. Most theorists, such as French critical philosopher Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, see contemporary art as political and interrogative, yet teleological, where the goal is to make the beholder question hegemony. However, they fail to see that the interrogative artworks

they explore stay within the confines of order precisely because of their conscious mission to interrogate a given regime.

Therefore, in order to find within what lies the force of art that is a real alternative able to generate change, I turn to literary theorist Krzysztof Ziarek's concept of the force of art. Although I am critical of his use of examples, Ziarek's take on the force of art as non-teleological, apolitical (and therefore overtly political) is the closest to how I see the force of contemporary art. Ziarek argues that the force of art is without directions, without imposed order and a goal, it is there to unsettle, to question, to interrogate, but also to *enable* a different kind of imagining the world.

How can one grasp this force of contemporary art? It is my contention that the 'ground zero' I am addressing has specific characteristics. It is a given that it invites the beholder beyond representation, namely beyond the narrative of the artwork. Once 'beyond representation', there is not much to hold onto. 'Ground zero' is a space of absence, as opposed to presence. Starting from the theory of *flow* and that of presence by philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, I propose that a lot of ground-breaking art works with presence. However, the contemporary art I explore and see as spaces of ground zero, (notably *This variation* (2012) by Tino Sehgal, *Uncle R* (2009) by Alexander Tinei and *Muster* (2012) by Clemens von Wedemeyer) do not offer this almost tangible phenomenon. One is not immersed in 'truth' or presence, but instead there is a need to introduce a new term, namely 'absence'. The beholder finds themselves in an empty space of absence which can allow non-teleological ways of existing in the world to surface. Spaces of absence are torn open by rupture. I specify rupture as an act of cutting that pierces right to the core of how we are in the world, demanding a profound revaluation. At the moment of the 'cut', there could well be a falling apart, an interrogation of all that we have taken for granted.

Yet, there is life to come after this annihilation, but the new world imagined cannot be predicted as it springs from a non-teleological ground. The ground zero of contemporary art therefore also works as a 'transformational object', a term I introduce coined by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas. It transforms us from something into something else but it is as if through 'dreaming', as opposed to 'telling', that the 'ground zero' of art invites us to re-imagine the world we live in. I argue that this is a most important way of re-imagining the world as it is non-directional. As transformational object, the ground zero of art may cause a

revisiting of the complex layers of one's personality, and through a non-teleological flow of associations, new alternatives might arise about how one can be with the world.

The aim of this book is to present a non-apologetic theory of the force and impact of contemporary art, and encourage the involvement of the art experience in decision-making about the matters of the world. It is also my hope that it will inspire readers to throw themselves fully into the art experience as there is a great deal in there to learn about themselves.

## Samenvatting

Dit boek stelt de mogelijke impact van hedendaagse kunst op de wereld van vandaag en de toekomst aan de orde. Het spreekt voor zich dat we niet op dezelfde wijze als nu op deze planeet kunnen blijven leven, omdat de mensheid haar eigen uitsterven tegemoet snelt. Het is mijn stellingname dat de oplossing om de gang van zaken te veranderen niet vanuit het gebruikelijke, dualistische, op probleem/oplossing gerichte kader kan komen. In het boek stel ik voor dat sommige hedendaagse kunst ons, mensen, kan laten zien hoe wij in de wereld kunnen zijn op een manier die niet door het ego wordt gedreven.

Hieruit volgend zijn de onderzoeksvragen: kan hedendaagse kunst van een dergelijk groot belang zijn? Vraagt dit niet teveel van de hedendaagse kunst? Laten we aannemen dat hedendaagse kunst zo'n belang heeft, *hoe* kan in dat geval de hedendaagse kunst dit waarmaken?

Het onderzoek komt voort uit twee met elkaar verbonden doch verschillende impulsen die het betoog in het boek bepalen. Aan de ene kant ervaar ik diepe, persoonlijke, transformationele ervaringen als ik in aanraking kom met bepaalde hedendaagse kunst, en dit is dit de empirische basis van dit onderzoek. Het is mijn veronderstelling dat sommige kunstervaringen zo krachtig kunnen zijn dat ze de grenzen van het ego versplinteren terwijl men in het kunstwerk is. Het is in deze ruimte, voorbij de begrenzing van het ego, dat de kracht van kunst zich kan onthullen. Aan de andere kant is er de drang van een diepe bezorgdheid over het lot van de mensheid op deze planeet. In dit boek komen de twee samen en wordt er geopperd dat de kracht van hedendaagse kunst ons kan helpen om te gaan met de wijze waarop de mensheid nu en in toekomst handelt en om actieve spelers te worden in de vormgeving hiervan.

De in dit boek uiteengezette argumenten komen daarom niet voort uit een theoretische positie, maar uit persoonlijke ervaringen en zorgen. Persoonlijke ervaringen vormen de basis voor een theorie die deze specifieke kracht van kunst contextualiseert. In het onderzoek wordt persoonlijke ervaring theoretisch geanalyseerd en wordt er geopperd dat deze vorm van persoonlijke ervaring naar boven kan komen in iedere beschouwer.

Met andere woorden, de propositie is dat als we *kunst op ons, de beschouwers, laten inwerken*, het mogelijk is een dergelijke transformationele ruimte binnen te treden. Daarom

is het theoretische veld waarin ik dit onderzoek positioneer een gebied in de kunstwetenschap dat, in tegenstelling tot het opvatten van het kunstwerk als een passief object, *kunst opvat als iets met een werking of agency*. In lijn met denkers als Mieke Bal, Alfred Gell, Georges Didi-Hubermann, WJT Mitchell, die zich afzetten tegen de opvatting van kunst als bewijsstuk of grond voor interpretatie, stel ik voor om kunst als een entiteit, een *agent* met een eigen werking op te vatten en te bezien *wat kunst wil* van de aanschouwer.

Het veld waarbinnen men kunst als *agency* opvat, dus met een eigen werking, wordt verder gespecificeerd door het feit dat ik in hedendaagse kunst geïnteresseerd ben. Wat kan hedendaagse kunst teweeg brengen? Wat voor werking (*agency*) heeft ze? Ook, waar komt dit samen met de noodzaak om genezing te vinden voor de kwalen van de planeet? Interessant genoeg staat iemand op een andere manier ten opzichte van de dingen-van-de-wereld wanneer hij een kunstervaring ondergaat. Als de begrenzings van het ego door de kunstervaring ter discussie worden gesteld, beseft men dat het leven zich uitstrekt voorbij de huidige ego-structuur – een op winst gestoelde egocentrische houding gebaseerd op dualisme en scheiding – waarmee wij leven. In deze ervaring wordt niet alleen de afstand tussen kunstwerk en beschouwer, maar ook de scheiding tussen de mens en de dingen-van-de-wereld opgeheven.

Wat is deze ruimte, waarin zulke drastische heroverwegingen (cognitief, emotioneel en zelfs fysiek) van hoe wij in de wereld staan, kunnen plaatsvinden? De theoretische fundering van deze argumentatie wordt gevonden in velden als New Materialism, Ecocriticism en Slow Science. Hoewel de ideeën over niet-hegemonisch gedrag in de wereld sterk uiteen lopen, is er een notie in deze theorieën die volgens mij regelmatig terugkomt, en dat is de behoefte tot het scheppen van lege, niet-teleologische ruimten waaruit nog onbekende alternatieven kunnen voortkomen voor de manier waarop men in de wereld staat. De Franse filosofe Catherine Malabou noemt zulke initiatieven 'zero points', lege ruimten met alle potentie. Voor haar is een 'zero point' een punt/moment van kracht vóór de vorm, de potentie van pure materie zonder een van bovenaf opgelegde orde. Volgens Malabou kan een nieuwe, niet-teleologische houding ten opzichte van de dingen-van-de-wereld uit zulke punten opbloeien, mits zulke ruimtes niet worden gedreven door de hegemonie die verantwoordelijk is voor de vernietiging van de planeet. Het is deze potentie van 'zero point' die in hedendaagse kunst op heel specifieke manieren naar boven komt; daarom neem ik deze term aangepast over en noem ik hem 'ground zero'.

'Ground zero' is een ruimte van kracht. Veel hedendaagse kunsttheorie brengt deze ruimte niet in verband met de kracht van kunst, echter, ik denk dat het van cruciaal belang is in het huidige debat. Vele theoretici, waaronder de Franse filosofen Chantal Mouffe en Jacques Rancière, zien hedendaagse kunst als politiek en als ondervragend, evenwel als teleologisch, met als doel de beschouwer de hegemonie te laten bevragen. Zij zien echter niet in dat de bevragende kunstwerken die zij verkennen binnen de grenzen van (hegemonische) orde blijven, juist omdat zij ervoor kiezen een bepaald regime te ondervragen.

Daarom wend ik mij tot het concept van de kracht van kunst van de literaire theoreticus Krzysztof Ziarek om te ontdekken waarin die kracht ligt als een werkelijk alternatief om verandering te bewerkstelligen. Hoewel ik het niet altijd eens ben met zijn gebruik van voorbeelden, komt Ziareks benadering van de kracht van kunst als niet-teleologisch, apolitek (en daardoor openlijk politiek) het dichts bij mijn kijk op de kracht van hedendaagse kunst. Ziarek argumenteert dat de kracht van kunst geen directe richting heeft, geen opgelegde orde of doel. Deze kracht is er om te doen wankelen, te bevragen, maar ook om het *mogelijk* te maken de wereld op een andere manier voor te stellen.

Hoe kunnen we greep krijgen op deze kracht van hedendaagse kunst? Ik beweer dat de 'ground zero' waarover ik spreek specifieke eigenschappen heeft. Vaststaat dat het de beschouwer uitnodigt te denken voorbij representatie, voorbij het verhaal van het kunstwerk. En eenmaal 'voorbij representatie' is er weinig houvast. 'Ground zero' is een ruimte van afwezigheid in plaats van aanwezigheid. Met als startpunt de *flow*theorie en de theorie van aanwezigheid van filosoof Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is het mijn overtuiging dat veel baanbrekende kunstwerken zinspelen op aanwezigheid. Echter, de hedendaagse kunst die ik verken en zie als 'ground zero'-ruimtes (te weten: *This variation*, 2012 van Tino Sehgal, *Uncle R*, 2009 van Alexander Tinei en *Muster*, 2012 van Clemens von Wedemeyer) bieden niet dit bijna tastbare fenomeen. Het is niet zo dat men ondergedompeld is in 'waarheid' of aanwezigheid, er is behoefte aan een nieuwe notie, die van 'afwezigheid'. De beschouwer vindt zich in een lege ruimte van afwezigheid die het toelaat om niet-teleologische manieren om in de wereld te zijn te laten bovenkomen. Dergelijke ruimtes van afwezigheid worden als het ware opengereten. Ik specificeer dit openrijten als een daad waarin direct wordt doorgedrongen tot de kern van hoe we in de wereld zijn en die een diepgaande revaluatie



opeist. Op het moment van dit scheuren is een uiteenvallen goed mogelijk, een ondervraging van alles dat we voor lief hebben genomen.

Toch is er leven na deze totale vernietiging, echter, de nieuw voor te stellen wereld kan niet voorspeld worden omdat hij voortkomt uit een niet-teleologische basis. De 'ground zero' van hedendaagse kunst werkt daarom ook als een 'transformationeel object', een term die ik gebruik, geïntroduceerd door psychoanalist Christopher Bollas. Het transformeert ons weliswaar tot iets anders, maar het lijkt erop dat de 'ground zero' van de kunst ons door 'dromen' in plaats van 'vertellen' uitnodigt om ons de wereld waarin wij leven opnieuw voor te stellen. Volgens mij is dit de belangrijkste manier voor het scheppen van een nieuw beeld van de wereld, omdat deze niet-gericht is. Als transformationele toestand kan de 'ground zero' van de kunst een herziening van de complexe lagen van iemands persoonlijkheid bewerkstelligen en uit de niet-teleologische stroom van associaties kunnen nieuwe alternatieven voortkomen over hoe wij in de wereld kunnen zijn.

Het doel van dit boek is het presenteren van een niet-apologetische theorie van de kracht en impact van de hedendaagse kunst en het aanmoedigen van de betrokkenheid van de kunstervaring bij besluitvorming over de dingen-van-de-wereld. Tot slot hoop ik dat het de lezers zal inspireren zich volledig aan de kunstervaring over te geven, omdat er heel wat over henzelf te leren valt.

## Curriculum Vitae

Délia Vékony was born in 1980, Budapest, Hungary. Having finished preparatory high school in Hungary, she studied at the University of South Africa (UNISA), first completing a BA, majoring in art history and philosophy and then an MA degree in art history with a focus on contemporary art theory.

Since 2004, she has been working actively as an art historian, curator and contemporary art theorist. She is the author of various publications such as 'What good are the arts? Social responsibility and contemporary art' in *Seismopolite. Journal of art and politics* (2015), participated at conferences with talks exploring the possible force and effect of contemporary art in presentations such *The impact of contemporary art* public lecture (2015) at the Hungarian Academy of Science. She has tutored public, on-line courses such as *Controversies in the contemporary art world* (2013), she is a trainer at the Contemporary Art Collector's Academy, Budapest, and she is in charge of building a contemporary art collection with a unique vision called Kepesita Collection. Aside from activities as such, she moderates panel discussions; one significant event took place in ICA London (2016) with a focus on possible ways to promote contemporary art from Eastern-Europe and Hungary. Aside from activities as such, she has authored the book *Lost in art. Searching for inherent quality in contemporary art*. Budapest: Underground (2011). Since 2006 she has been teaching art history and arts management at the International Business School, Budapest, where she is currently the head of the arts specialization program. She started her doctoral studies at Leiden University in 2013.

Délia enjoys cooking, good wine, food and spending time in nature. She is passionate about the body in general and a form of exercise, called bodyArt, in particular. She is dedicated to meditation/contemplation, interested in (Christian) mysticism and she is a 'seeker'. For her, all this is intertwined with her professional life and approach to art.

